20

The WIZARD

APRIL '41

Adventures in Money Making

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

MURDER IN GOLD
a book-length novel of
CASH GORMAN in
Hollywood.
By PHIL R. SHERIDAN

10 CENTS
12c IN CANADA

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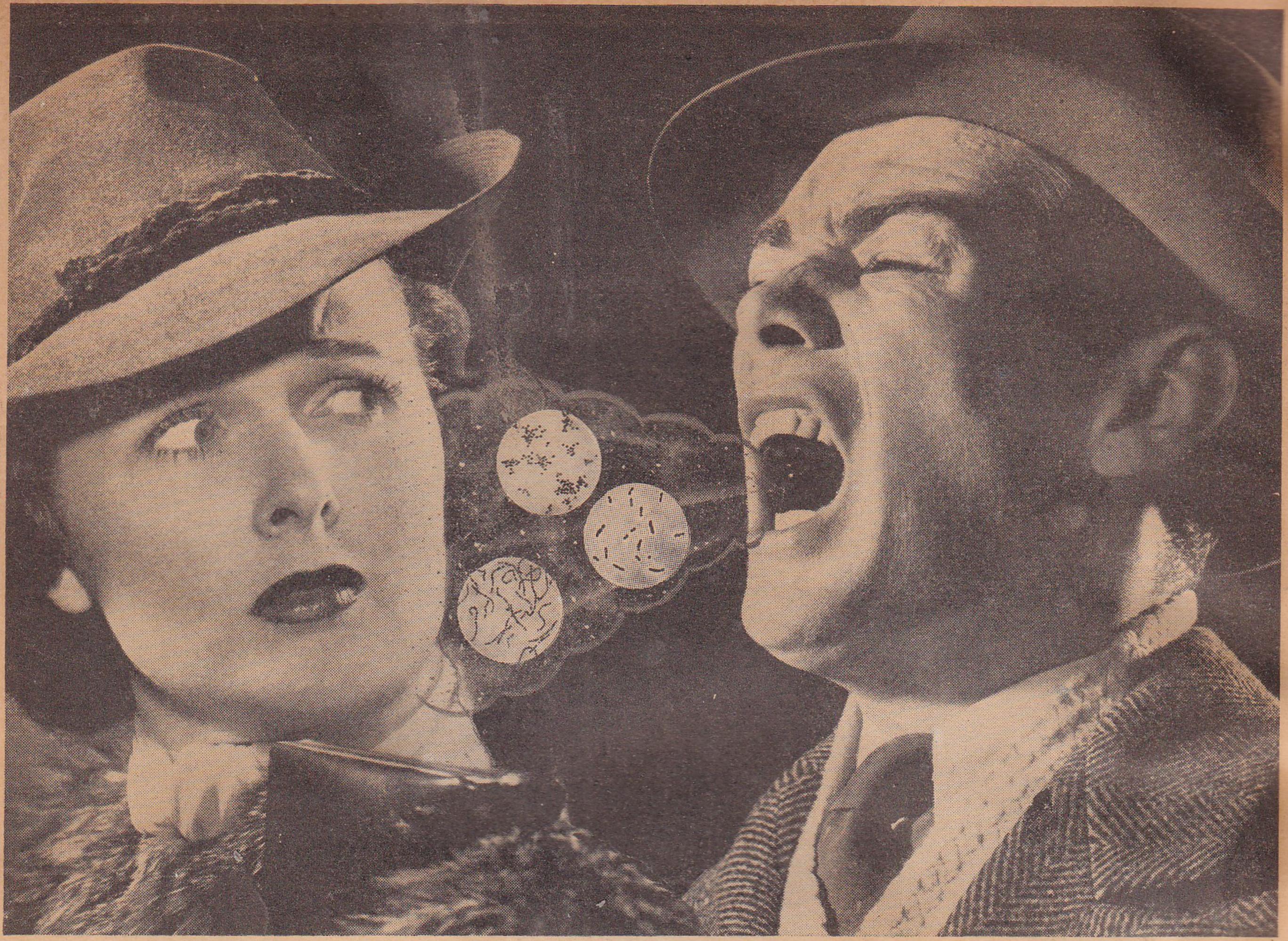

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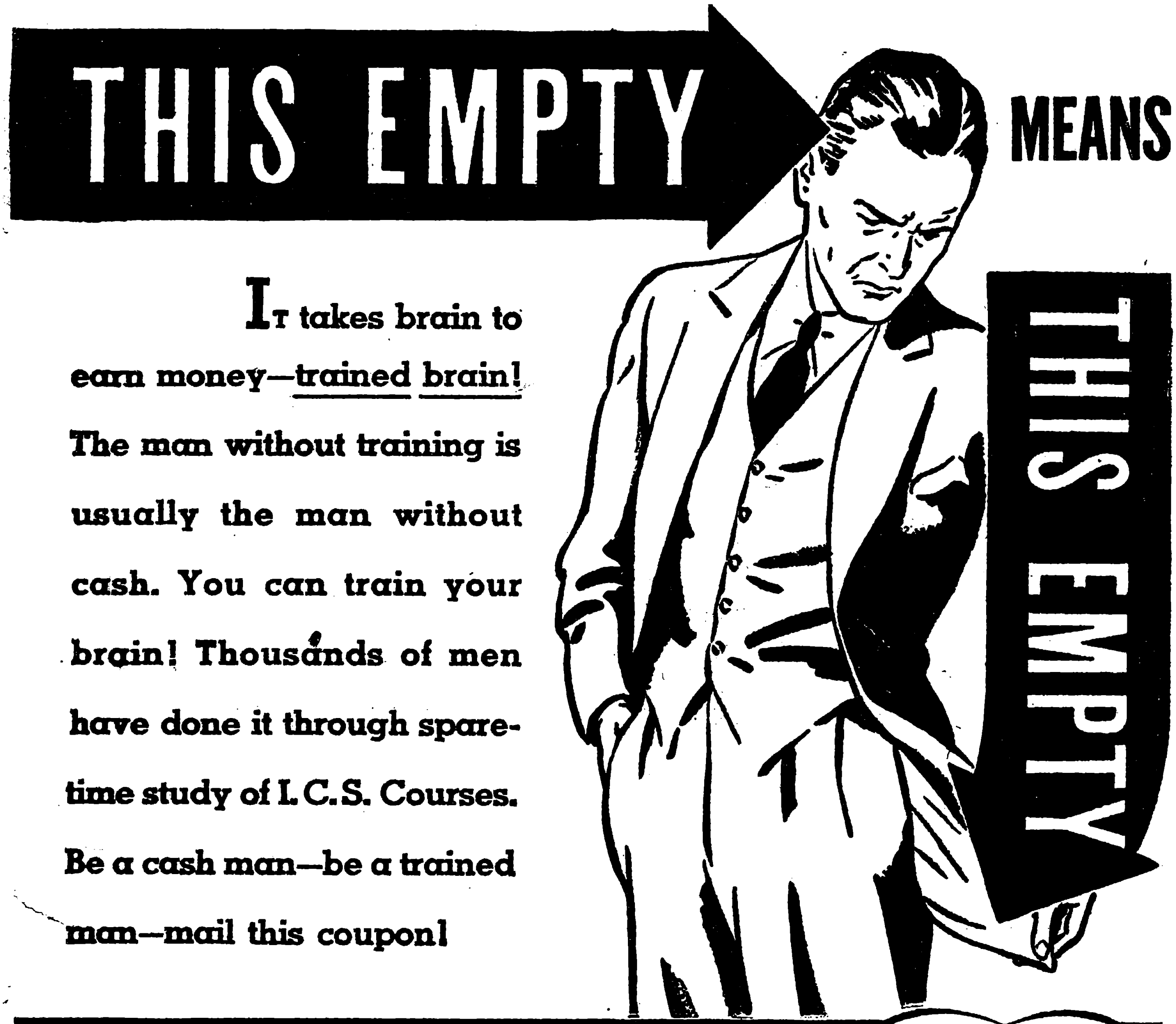

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WIZ—1

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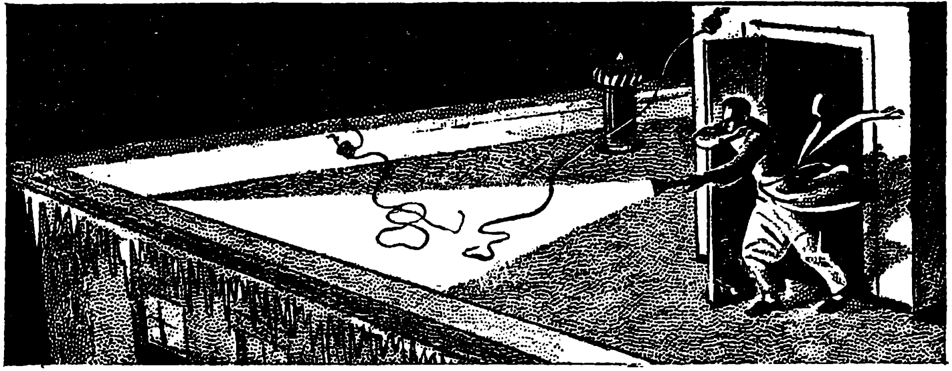

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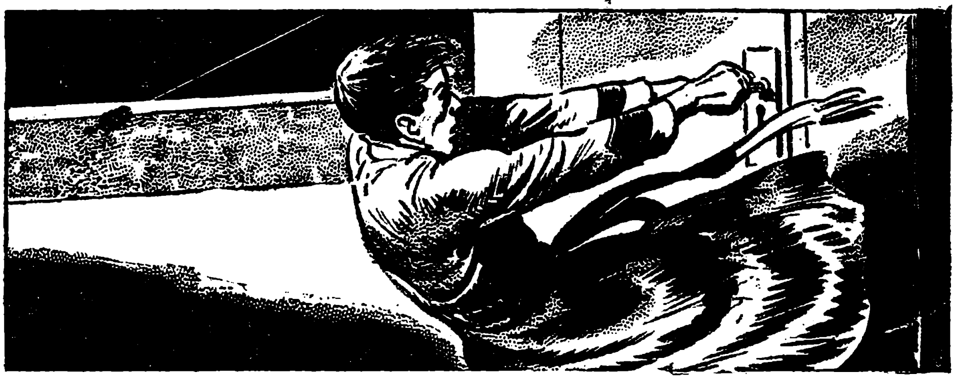

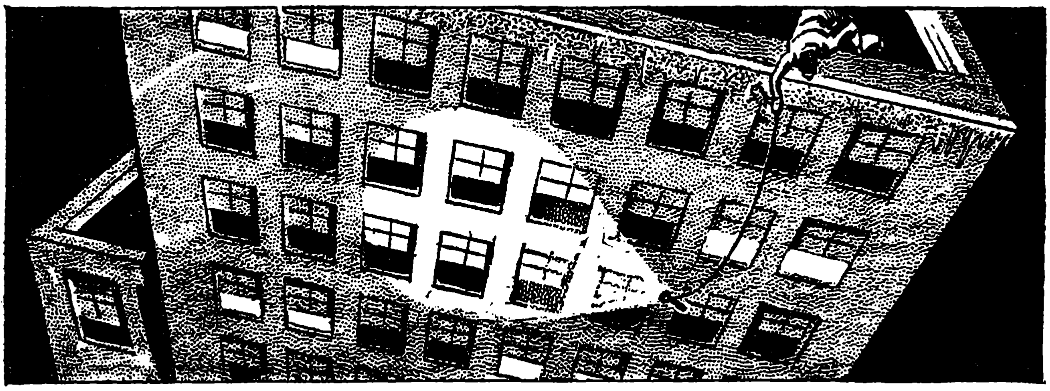

"NEARLY FROZEN TO DEATH, I had an inspiration. Ripping the aerial loose, I tied the lighted flashlight to it, and swung it over the side of the building. Luckily the light attracted someone in an apartment below. Thanks to those dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries I was saved.

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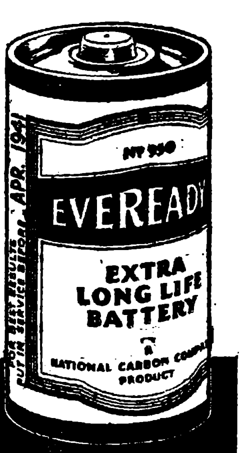

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The WIZARD

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

MURDER IN GOLD . . . . **Phil R. Sheridan** . . . **9**

Seeing the sights in Hollywood, Cash Gorman steps into the middle of a situation. In less time than a thrilling short takes he is propelled into a sequence of events teeming with high intrigue and adventure. Through a strange turn an attempt is made on Cash's life, and failure to accomplish it leads to a handsome bribe to give up an assignment he hasn't got . . . solve the financial riddle of Continental Pictures. Cash and his aid, Jimmy Ranger, plunge into the task with all the authority they do not possess and come acropper of the most brazen manipulation of accounts and lives you've ever heard of. Like desperate animals the cornered swindlers fight back with weapons that test the acumen and wit of the wiley Gorman through a thrill-packed novel.

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURE

MERCHANT OF VENGEANCE . . . **Jess Carver** **89**

Senator Flick evolves a perfect scheme for shearing Cully Twig. But he figures without consulting Culpepper and the result is hilarious.

FALSE ALARM . . . . **Arthur Mann** **100**

Joe Feder has the perfect invention. Everything is millions until Egon Hauser, the inventor, demonstrates.

KNOW YOUR MONEY **98**

In this special article, the United States Secret Service tells you how to avoid losing because of counterfeit bills.

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COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

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Cash Takes A Bow

• Readers write with approval of Jeff and his antics.

THOMAS JEFFERSON GORMAN, often referred to as Cash by his friends and enemies because of his affluent command or prodigious lack of the green commodity, has whirled into many exciting and strange financial adventures. But in "Murder In Gold," beginning on page 9 of this issue, Jeff and his "leg-man," Jimmy Ranger, stumble unexpectedly into a quagmire of circumstances which, after almost costing Jeff his life, has him facing a charge of embezzlement. Excitement hits a new high.

Jeff, the wizard of odds, is confronted with the most difficult and most fascinating jig-saw of his still youthful career as a free-lance compiler of juggled profits.

The scene is Hollywood. Events convince Jeff that he is entangled in a drama more spectacular than any ever recorded on the celluloid strips.

Continental Pictures is a motion-picture company with a distressing record of fatal accidents to its important employees; so distressing a record that Jeff is prompted to investigate it.

As a result, death visits the studio again; a death which to Jeff is stripped of its disguise and revealed as murder!

Lurking within the protective folds of Continental Pictures is a hydra-headed parasite, feeding itself on company profits and striking wantonly at its enemies.

The trapping and multiple-beheading of this parasite ring makes "Murder In Gold," a tense and perilous journey for Cash and Jimmy from start to climactic ending. Begin it now on page 9.

Culpepper Twig, the rural genius of lazy Cider Creek, takes his old enemy, Senator Flick, for another horse trade in "The Merchant Of Vengeance," by Jess Carver, beginning on page 89 of this issue.

Another adventurer returns to these pages in the person of Joe Feder, mental giant of Ace Promotions, Inc. Egon Hauser, the eccentric inventor, brings his latest brain-child to Joe and as a result Ace Promotions teeters uncertainly on the very brink of financial ruin and worse. It's "False Alarm," by Arthur Mann, beginning on page 100.

• • •

Cash Gorman has won many friends because he is plausible. It would take many pages of space to acknowledge all the fine things which have been said about him. Suffice to say that we are grateful for the good wishes we have received for him and we hope we will be able to keep him to your liking.

His many and varied experiences lead him into a new sort of complication in the next issue. Sabotage catches up to him and Cash is caught in the middle. And you'll be interested to know whether Jimmy Ranger comes back to help him or whether Jimmy continues with his Hollywood environment which messes him up with sirens and whatnots in this present experience. Cash will give many hours of thrilling entertainment when he meets "Saboteurs in High Gear" in the next issue of Wizard. Get it now.

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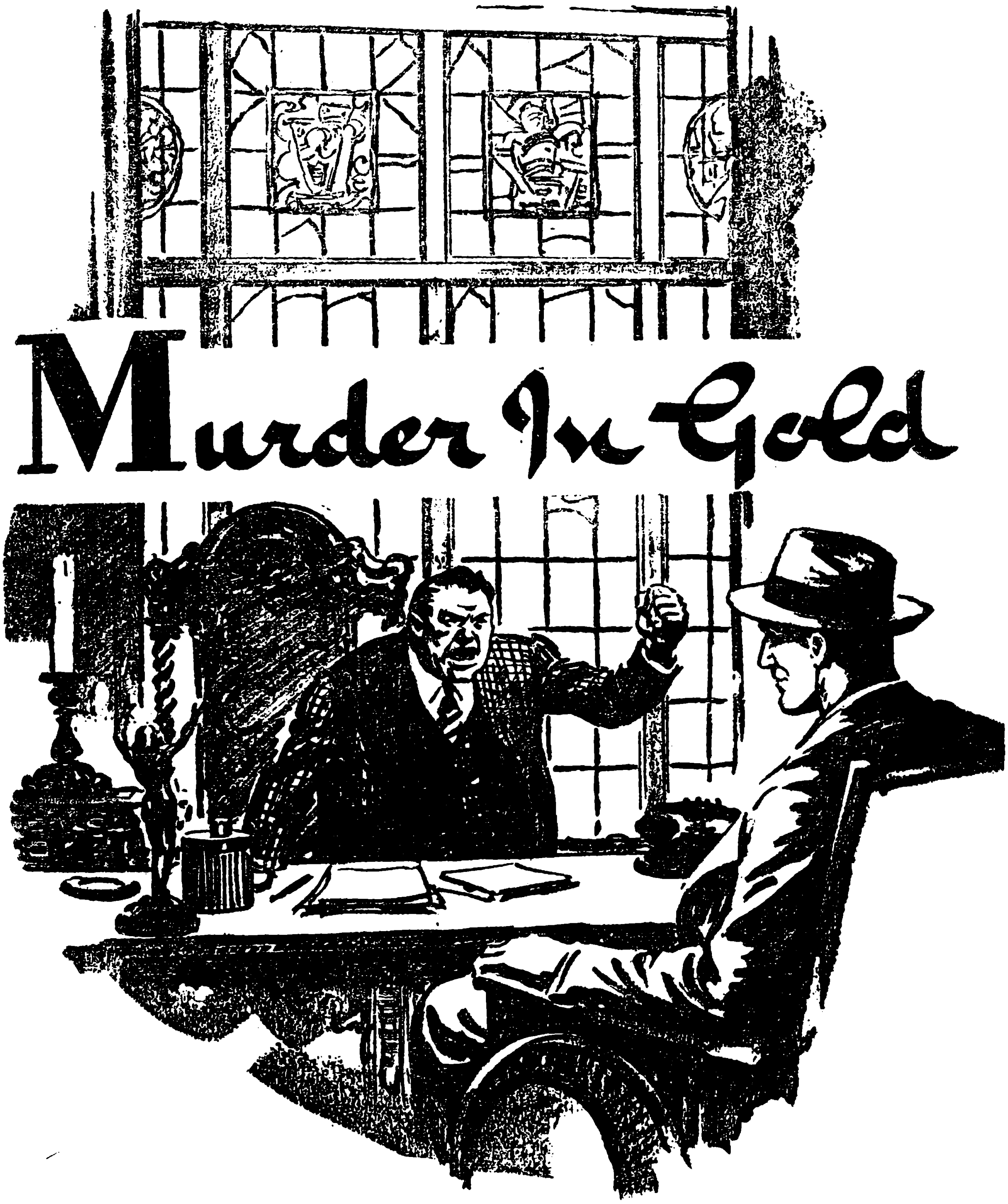
Murder In Gold



BY PHIL R. SHERIDAN

• Cash Gorman stumbles into a Hollywood drama of financial plunder, rife with murder and intrigue and not part of any script scheduled for production at the cinema city.

THERE was a speculative gleam in Thomas Jefferson Gorman's alert black eyes as they swept the sprawling city within a city which constituted the Continental Pictures Studio.

"Have you noticed anything strange about our reception out here, Jimmy?" he asked his companion on the small balcony from which they were inspecting Continental City.

"Strange?" Jimmy exclaimed, bewilderment and alarm written in every feature of his broad, freckled face. "Strange, hell! Let's get out of here, Cash. Somebody is dreaming up bad trouble for us, and I think it's that—"

"Hold it!" Jeff cautioned him. "We've got company."

Barbara Jordan rejoined them, accompanied by a small bespectacled man with thin, dark hair plastered sparingly over his scalp. He carried his head with the alert attentiveness of a curious bird and, as he approached, he inspected Jeff shrewdly.

"This is Benning Rosswell, the director," Barbara said. "Cash Gorman, Benny. And this is Mr. Gorman's assistant, Mr. Ranger."

"Welcome to Hollywood, Mr. Gorman," Rosswell smiled. "How do you find it?"

"All is confusion," Jeff laughed. "And Jimmy's feet ache."

Rosswell chuckled. "Would you care to see us shoot a scene? I'm about ready to make some close action on 'Dunkirk,' and this scene is the dynamic high spot—the launching, under shellfire, of a small boat from a torpedoed liner."

Barbara Jordan turned her blue eyes on Jeff, smiling possessively: "Cash said he wanted to see everything, Benny. And we've seen everything but a picture actually being made."

"I thought Mr. Gorman might be interested, so I held up the scene for a few minutes," Rosswell said, adding: "Where have you been keeping yourself? We've missed your curly locks."

She looked at him in horror. "Benny! Haven't you noticed?" she demanded, sweeping her night-black hair off her face. "My locks aren't curly any more." She winked at Jeff: "But you don't seem a day balder, Benny."

The director smiled ruefully and ran his hand over his departing hair. "You filthy rich are so impolite," he commented. "No kidding, where have you been?"

"Oh, I spent most of the summer in Newport," she informed him languidly. "It was dull as the devil."

Jimmy Ranger nudged Jeff. "There's a great view over here, Cash," he said, moving to the far side of the balcony. Cash drifted after him.

"Did you get that?" Jimmy demanded. "Rosswell has been holding up the scene because he thought you might be interested. For a tourist out to see a movie lot, you're getting an awful lot of attention. They couldn't salve you more if you'd just bought the joint."

Jeff frowned uneasily. "Probably it's just because we're here with Barbara Jordan."

Jimmy shook his head, his eyes mystified. "That supervisor, Gelby, or whatever he was, back in the projection room, hardly looked at Barbara. He galloped up to you as if you were his rich uncle. Quote: 'We've been expecting you, Mr. Gorman. We have some of the day's rushes here if you'd like to see them.' Unquote."

Jimmy stared at his employer. "Why the hell should they be expecting *you?* And why the day's rushes. If they were last year's you wouldn't have known the difference."

"It did seem a little curious," Jeff admitted, looking thoughtfully at Barbara Jordan.

Jimmy nodded. "Don't laugh now, but I think she's up to something," he confided. "Veddy, veddy social little gals like Barbara don't go running around acting as tourist guides to strangers just out of the goodness of their hearts."

Jeff shrugged. "Dallas Drake probably told her we were 'fun,' and that's the passport in her crowd." He eyed his assistant quizzically. "What could she want from us? She's one of the richest girls in America."

"Have it your own way." Jimmy shrugged. "How much is she worth on the hoof, anyway?"

"The newspapers put it at twenty million," Jeff replied. "It may be less, but I don't think she has to worry much about her next pair of stockings."

"She doesn't wear any," Jimmy commented wryly. "That's sun tan you're looking at." He frowned, running a heavy hand through his close-cropped sandy hair. "You know how you feel in football when you go storming into the other team's backfield and then find out you've been mouse-trapped? Well, that's how I feel right now. We should have kept right on going to Mexico with our fishing rods and told Mrs. Drake's little gold-plated playmate to roll her hoop."

Jeff, too, sensed a strong undercurrent of intrigue, but there was nothing to put his finger on, and no apparent reason why he should be involved in it, anyway. They had met Barbara Jordan only the preceding day when, in a bubble of conversation, she had said: "When Dallas Drake found out I was coming to Los Angeles, she made me promise I would see that you had a good time, and I'm going to do it if it kills you."

Jeff had laughed. "Some of the best people have tried that."

"What?"

"To kill me," he had remarked.

She had looked startled, and Jeff had been mildly astonished to see her turn suddenly pale. With a return to gaiety that had seemed forced, she had said: "In me you see the finest little rubberneck spieler in town. All the best tourists come to Barbara. Can I interest you in a tour of our fair city?"

"Including the bedrooms of the stars?" Jeff had inquired.

"Absolutely! But how about starting more modestly? Say, a tour of a studio."

"What studio?"

"Continental," she had answered. "I know everybody out there."

JEFF examined her attentively now as she talked with Benning Rosswell. The word for Barbara was "striking"—tall, broad-shouldered and slim, her hair swept to her shoulders in a long bob, night-dark in color, forming a startling contrast for incredibly blue eyes. When she walked it was with the air of one accustomed to attracting attention.

"I think we've been scaring ourselves," he told Jimmy finally. "She's too scatter-brained to mousetrap anybody, and besides, there's no reason for it."

Jimmy grunted. "She's not so dumb for my money. And even so, when a fisherman uses live bait does the bait know what's going on?"

Jeff looked up sharply. "There's always that," he admitted. "But who's fishing for what? Our bank roll isn't big enough to make a fender dent in Continental Pictures. After all, if you're chaperoned by twenty million dollars like Barbara, you're bound to get attention, and—"

"Mr. Gorman?"

Jeff swung around to find a round, fatherly-looking little man bustling toward him through the room which opened onto the balcony, accompanied by three attentive subordinates. "Mr. Gorman?" he repeated in a thin, high-pitched voice.

Jeff nodded.

"How do you do, Mr. Gorman. I'm David Lozing." With a start, Jeff recognized the name of Continental's famous vice president in charge of production—the real power in Continental Pictures. Lozing surrendered a plump, soft hand to Jeff's firm grip. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Gorman. Delighted. Always pleased to meet any friends of Miss Jordan's."

Like his hand, Lozing was soft and plump and small, except for his eyes, which were small but not soft at all. They were set in his buttery face like twin black shoe buttons, and were darting nervously from Jeff's face to Jimmy's. They seemed to glitter when the light caught them.

"How do you do," Lozing continued, placing his limp hand in Jimmy Ranger's for a moment. "You are Mr. Granger, are you not? Mr. Gorman's assistant, I think—"

"Ranger," Jimmy corrected him dryly.

"Oh, yes, Ranger. I beg your pardon," Lozing said. He frowned angrily at one of his aids, obviously placing the blame for this social blunder squarely upon the unhappy young man's drooping shoulders. "How do you do, Mr. Ranger."

Lozing turned back to Jeff: "I hope you've enjoyed your inspection of Continental City, Mr. Gorman?"

"It's been very interesting," Jeff said, noting with amazement that Lozing seemed to be uneasy in his presence. "Thank you for permitting us the liberty of the studio, Mr. Lozing."

Jeff was astonished to see Lozing's eyes narrow suspiciously, as if he suspected some hidden meaning in this innocent remark.

"Not at all; not at all. Don't mention it. Delighted," the producer said. He beamed on them affably, but his eyes remained hard and wary. "I'm terribly sorry that I can't show you around myself," he continued, spreading the palms of his plump, soft hands upward in a helpless gesture. "Terribly sorry. Nothing would give me more pleasure, but I am rushed. Nothing but work, work, work. Sometimes it seems that I have to attend to every detail of production." His shoe-button eyes surveyed Cash in guarded appraisal.

"That's very kind of you," Jeff said, watching Lozing attentively. The producer knew Barbara Jordan was on the balcony and was deliberately keeping his back to her so as to appear unaware of her presence. "However, we wouldn't think of taking up your time, Mr. Lozing. We're simply sightsee—"

"Cash!"

The voice was Barbara's, and he broke off, looking toward her questioningly.

"Benny just received word that they're ready to shoot that scene whenever you're ready," she said, completely ignoring Lozing, who started slightly, then exclaimed: "Barbara! How are you?" He hurried toward her, seizing both of her hands in his. "You're looking wonderful, Barbara. Wonderful. You're more beautiful every time I see you. And how is your uncle Rufus?"

"Very well, I presume. I haven't seen him for some time," Barbara replied. She disengaged her hands from David Lozing's with a gesture which clearly indicated that his familiarity was out of order. The change in her was startling. From a gay, friendly attitude she had become as haughty as a magazine cover.

"She'd freeze an Eskimo," Jimmy remarked softly.

If Lozing noticed her attitude, he showed no sign of it. "I'm very fond of Barbara's uncle," he continued, apparently addressing everyone, although his eyes darted to Jeff and then back again to Barbara. "What a splendid man! What a man in American industry—Rufus C. Jordan. There's something solid about that name. It's the name of an empire builder." Lozing paused and glanced around dramatically. In a senatorial tone, he continued: "Continental is proud to have Mr. Jordan associated in its affairs."

Jeff and Jimmy exchanged startled glances. That was their first news that the Jordan interests held shares in Continental.

Barbara ignored this effusion over her uncle completely, and Jeff suddenly became aware of the fact that something was expected of him.

"A splendid man," Jeff assented forcibly, although his knowledge of Barbara's Uncle Rufus was limited to what he had read of him in the newspapers. "One of the best. Heart of gold."

"But not quite so soft," Jimmy Ranger commented.

Silence was broken by a peal of laughter from Benning Rosswell.

Lozing smiled uncertainly, pumped Jeff's hand and hurried off, saying: "Anything I can do for you, Mr. Gorman, anything at all, just call on me. I'm looking forward to our first conference."

"What?" Jeff demanded.

Lozing, however, was already on his way.

Jimmy Ranger stared at Jeff: "What's this?"

Jeff smiled suddenly, a flash of white teeth in a weather-tanned face. "I don't know, but I smell larceny. Get that director out of earshot. I want to talk to our little raven-haired heiress."

OBSERVING Barbara closely as Rosswell, accompanied by Jimmy, led the way to the "Dunkirk" set, Jeff said: "I didn't know you were one of the proprietors of this madhouse."

She laughed gayly: "Didn't I tell you?" She slowed her pace, dropping farther behind Rosswell, who was doing his best to listen to both them and Jimmy. "I thought everybody knew I owned a chunk of the place. How do you like it? Exciting, isn't it?"

Jeff nodded. "Lozing's a charming man, isn't he?"

Barbara's expression froze and her eyes flamed. Turning angrily on Jeff, she exclaimed: "I despise him. He's the most loathsome little beast I've ever met. I don't think he'd stop at anything to get his way—not even murder."

Her voice was fogged with hatred. Jeff's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how any real man could like him," she said, ignoring his question. "He shakes hands like a sponge."

"Well, he's a great picture man, anyway," Jeff remarked.

She laughed contemptuously. "Is he? Continental hasn't made a nickel in four years."

Jeff, watching her shrewdly, put his first impression of her in abeyance. Possibly Barbara only acted like a scatterbrain at times.

"Why is Lozing still here, then? He's wielding the real executive power, isn't he?" Jeff asked. "That makes him responsible for losses, doesn't it?"

Barbara shrugged her expensive shoulder. "Oh, I don't know anything about business," she said, pouting slightly. "All I know is, I don't like him!"

Jeff's jaw tightened. "Quit the double talk, darling," he snapped. "Why does Lozing expect to have a conference with me? What's going on here?"

She stared at him in confusion, and then smiled, grasping his arm: "Oh, look at that gorgeous set!"

Jeff stopped in the doorway in surprise. Before them on the huge sound stage, tilted at a crazy angle, was the midsection of a ship. So huge and realistic was it that Jeff for the moment had the illusion that a fragment had been cut from a storm-battered liner from a few feet behind her first-deck line to the boat deck and transported bodily to the Continental studio. Her lower-deck railing was half torn away. There were gaping holes in the small section of hull visible. One lifeboat was smashed and hung precariously from a single davit.

"Isn't that a honey?" Benning Rosswell asked over his shoulder. "I have a few things to check over, Mr. Gorman. Would you like to come with me? I think you'll find it interesting."

Barbara Jordan's eyes followed Jeff thoughtfully. He wasn't handsome, but he commanded attention, and the unfailing alertness of his keen, watchful black eyes belied the laziness of his movements. He was close to six feet, reasonably broad-shouldered and fit-looking. His cheekbones were high, and his nose had a slight bump at the bridge, as though it might once have been broken. Except for the saving grace of a humorous mouth, it would have been a ruthless face. His age, Barbara judged, was somewhere in the early thirties. As she watched him, the speculative look in her eyes changed suddenly and a triumphant smile appeared on her lips.

Rosswell was plainly very much pleased with his setting, and Jeff caught the contagious excitement of the scene as the director explained it to him while the uniformed extras and the stars, Todd Barrett and Eunice Sutton, took their places on the built-up fragment of ship.

"Those vents over there will blow rain across the screen," Rosswell told him, pointing out the wind machines. "That platform the set is built on tips up, as if the boat was going down by the stern. And that entire section just to the left of the funnel is collapsible. There's a smoke-and-flame mechanism there, and at my signal it goes off, simulating a bursting aërial bomb. In the preceding scene one davit rope gave way, dropping one end of the lifeboat and spilling out the men in it—that's what those mattresses on the floor are for. In this scene, Barrett makes a jump for the lifeboat with Sutton in his arms, and just as he reaches it the bomb strikes and the second davit goes. The lifeboat drops away."

"Aren't you afraid of killing a couple of valuable stars?" Jeff asked.

Rosswell laughed. "There is a slight pause for stunt players to relieve them in the lifeboat."

Inspecting the hole in the hull of the phony ship, Jeff frowned. "I'm probably speaking out of turn," he remarked, "but my dad was a tramp-ship captain and I was brought up on 'em. I've seen a few ships with holes knocked in 'em, and that looks a little phony to me." He walked beneath the lifeboat to examine the hole at closer range. "You can tell that shambles inside is painted."

Rosswell laughed. "Can you? Wait a minute—" He raised his voice: *"Lights!"*

The call was repeated, the scene darkened. Clever lighting within the hole brought the painted background out sharply, bringing out the shambles inside the hole in the ship as realistically as if she were a real ship with interior safety lights still burning in her battered hull. Silent flashes simulating bursting shells back-lighted the scene.

"I take it back," Jeff laughed. "How do you set this destruction to work?"

"Just raise my hand," Rosswell said. "Like this—"

There was a sharp explosion, followed by an excited swell of panic-stricken voices and the rending smash of splintering wood.

Confused by the unexpected explosion and a blinding flash from the hole in the hull beside him, Jeff uncertainly stood his ground, momentarily unable to see.

Barbara's voice cut shrilly through the uproar:

"Jeff!" she screamed. *"Look out! The lifeboat—"*

He jerked his head upward at her hysterical warning. The lifeboat was hurtling down at him. Instinctively he ducked and attempted to thrust himself forward to safety. The bow of the falling boat struck him, throwing his body heavily forward into a camera dolly. The big Mitchell mounted on it smashed to the floor, grazing his head as it fell.

"Turn up these lights," Rosswell thundered. "First aid! Get a doctor!"

Jeff, blood running down his face from a jagged cut on his forehead, sprawled lifelessly on the floor.

"You killed him," Barbara screamed at Rosswell. "You killed him just like Lozing killed Rex Jones!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FISH SNARED.

IT was the blond, beautiful Eunice Sutton who took command of the situation. The star, costumed as a Red Cross nurse, waved toward Barbara.

"Take her off and quiet her down, Todd," she told her costar, Todd Barrett, as she pushed between Benning Rosswell and Jimmy Ranger. "Get out of the way, you two."

The actress knelt beside Jeff and felt his pulse briefly. "Don't try to move him, Benny, until the doctor gets here," she commanded. "And get this mob back."

Jimmy Ranger turned white. "You think his back is broken?" he declared, kneeling anxiously beside her. She didn't answer.

With expert fingers she wiped the blood from Jeff's head and examined his forehead: "The cut's not deep, anyway."

Jeff tentatively opened one eye. Seeing Eunice Sutton bending over him, he opened the other in surprise. "I know," he said, "you're an angel."

The actress laughed, and Jimmy Ranger, his voice deep with relief, asked: "How do you feel, Jeff?"

Painfully, Jeff propped himself up on his elbows. "Nope, this can't be heaven—Ranger's here!" Jeff eyed Eunice Sutton's nursing uniform, adding: "You take your parts seriously, don't you?"

"Don't talk so much and don't be so smart," she replied. "I used to be a nurse."

Jeff nodded: "And who dropped that boat on me?"

Jimmy Ranger shot out a heavy hand, grasping Benning Rosswell by the coat lapel. "You did that on purpose," he said, his voice ominously flat.

"No, I . . . I— That's ridiculous!" Rosswell stammered, his face pale. "Honestly, I didn't have any idea—"

Barbara Jordan broke away from Todd Barrett and pushed through the crowd to confront Rosswell. "You tried to kill him," she accused the director.

"No, really—you don't understand," Rosswell gasped.

"The hell we don't, mister," Jimmy Ranger declared, his eyes venomous blue slits. "You raised your hand, and that was the signal." He turned belligerently on Barbara Jordan. "There's been something fishy about this whole trip, sister. What are you up to, anyway?"

Jeff spoke up quickly. "Wait a minute, Jimmy—hold on. What happened, Rosswell?"

"I don't know," Rosswell said. "I just raised my hand, but the signal wasn't supposed to be taken up. Action hadn't begun. We weren't shooting. I don't understand it. Where's the property man who had charge back there?"

A big man stepped up. "Right here, Mr. Rosswell. I got the signal from Mr. Grock."

Jeff looked at the property man curiously. "Didn't you see me standing there?"

"No, sir; I couldn't see anybody but Mr. Grock. That's why the signal had to be relayed. I couldn't even see Mr. Rosswell."

"Who's Grock?" Jimmy demanded of Rosswell.

"My assistant." Rosswell raised his voice. "Grock!"

Barbara Jordan, her face more suspicious than ever, said: "He's Lozing's son-in-law." There was contempt in her voice. "I might have known *he* was mixed up in this."

A thin, tall, surly-faced young man pushed through the group around them, demanding: "What do you mean by that?"

Eunice Sutton exclaimed: "Barbara!" She grabbed the other girl by the arm and shook her, whispering: "Don't be stupid; it won't do any good."

Barbara, her eyes flashing, had been obviously on the verge of an angry denunciation of Grock.

The assistant director pushed his face close to her: "I want to know what you meant," he demanded angrily. "You may have all the dough there is, but you can't throw muck at me and get away with it. I'll sue you for slander!"

Jimmy Ranger grabbed Grock's arm and swung him around. "You aren't going to sue anybody right now, buddy," he declared. "You've got some explaining to do."

"Explain what?" Grock demanded. "Rosswell raised his hand, didn't he?"

"Yes, I did, but you knew we weren't shooting," Rosswell said, eying Grock suspiciously. "Why did you pass the signal along?"

"Listen! You're supposed to be the master mind around here. You gave the signal and I picked it up. You called for lights and I thought you were shooting. The 'silent' light was on." Grock pointed. "It's still on."

Rosswell looked at it in surprise. He shook his head. "You could see there was no action," he said finally. "You could see Mr. Gorman standing under the boat."

"I couldn't see that part of the set from where I was standing," Grock said, pointing to a pile of scenery from a previous set which had not been moved. That pile of props was in the way."

"What do you mean, you couldn't see that part of the set," Jimmy Ranger demanded. "I was standing right here, and I could see you—"

"You could see me? You didn't even know me," Grock sneered. "And with the lights down off-stage, you couldn't recognize even your mother at that distance—"

"Yeah, but I could recognize that pink beret," Jimmy retorted. "I even asked somebody if pink was considered a masculine color out here."

"You weren't even looking at me when Rosswell gave the signal," Grock snapped, flushing heavily. "Your back was turned."

Jimmy retorted quickly: "How do *you* know?"

"I saw him," Grock declared to the rest.

"I thought you said it wasn't possible to recognize anybody at that distance because of lights," Jeff said sharply.

"I could see *him* because the light from the set reflected on him," Grock explained smoothly. "But he couldn't have seen me."

Jeff stared at the man coldly. "If you saw him, then you could see me, too," he declared. "Draw a line of vision between us and he'd be standing on it."

"That's a lie!" Grock spat out angrily.

Jimmy Ranger's fist started from his hip and caught Grock squarely on the point of his jaw. The thud was sickening. Grock was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Pat Hagan, the dialogue expert, looked at Jimmy with sudden respect. "Did you learn that in Wall Street?" he asked.

Jeff, who was laughing painfully, answered: "He learned that playing football in Colorado."

"They must play after the whistle blows," Hagan commented.

Eunice Sutton completely forgot the condition of her patient and leaned on his chest, the better to peer through the surrounding actors and technicians at Jimmy.

"I'm crazy about fullbacks," she sighed, her blue eyes growing wider and dreamier. "Why don't you come down to my place at Malibu Saturday, Mr. Gorman? Bring him with you."

"Cut your own cake—and get off my chest," Jeff said.

A doctor bustled through the circle of people, saying: "Who's hurt? What happened?"

Jeff jerked his head toward Grock. "I think you'd better look at him," he said.

"Leave him lie," Eunice Sutton suggested. "He's so much nicer when he isn't talking."

"Such a thing for an angel of mercy to say," Jeff commented dryly.

"You ask me for my opinion of that worm and you'll hear worse," she replied, sotto voce. "Nothing's tickled me so much for years. Your assistant is going to be a big success in Hollywood. He socks the right people." To the doctor she said: "That boat fell and struck Mr. Gorman a glancing blow in the back, Dr. Rose."

The doctor looked at Jeff in astonishment. "Mr. Gorman!" he exclaimed. "Are you Mr. Gorman?"

Jeff nodded.

The doctor made sympathetic clucking noises in his throat and shook his head. Jeff thought he detected a worried concern in the man's eyes that had nothing to do with the purely professional aspects of the case. "I'm sorry to meet you under such circumstances, Mr. Gorman," he said, kneeling beside Jeff and feeling his pulse. "What happened to Mr. Grock?" he asked, starting to go to the assistant director's side.

"I hit him," Jimmy explained.

Dr. Rose blinked. "Here," he said, extending a vial of smelling salts. "This will bring him around."

He returned to his examination of Jeff. "You're lucky," he said finally. "No fractures, I hope. X-ray pictures will tell us for sure. Your back muscles on the left side are all badly bruised. Hm-m-m! We'll have to be on the lookout for possible internal injuries."

Jeff started to get up.

"Don't try to walk," the doctor said. "The ambulance will be here in a moment. I'll have you taken on a stretcher. No use taking any chances."

Grock, still groggy, climbed to his feet, cursing Jimmy wildly.

"Say! Stop that," Jimmy demanded. "There are ladies present."

"I'll fix your wagon," Grock said. "You may think you're going to run things around this lot, but you aren't running me, you dirty—" Grock's language became freshly abusive. This time Jimmy, who was a head shorter but twice as wide as Grock, let him have it in the eye.

Dr. Rose reopened his bag. Handing the smelling salts to Pat Hagan, he said: "Just keep them here."

"Wow! What a man!" Eunice Sutton exclaimed.

"He's handy around the house, too," Jeff said. "Cooks swell French-fried potatoes." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Did Grock say something about us thinking we are going to run things around this lot?"

"I caught something like that amidst the profanity," she said. "Why?"

"What's he mean?" Jeff asked.

The actress stared at him and then began laughing. "Aren't you cute, though?" she asked. "Take off your false mustache, Mr. Hemmingway. We all know you!"

Jeff's brow furrowed painfully beneath the emergency dressing the doctor had put on his head wound. "I really don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Eunice Sutton stared at him for a few seconds. "Please, Mr. Gorman," she said. "You know, I'd believe you if I didn't know you were—shall we say—avoiding the issue?"

Barbara Jordan broke in hurriedly on the conversation. "Here's the stretcher, Cash. I'll ride down to the hospital with you. And Eunice, thank you so much, darling."

"Am I dismissed?" Eunice asked, looking at Barbara coldly.

"No, dear; you know I didn't mean it that way, but we don't know yet if possibly Cash hasn't something serious the matter."

Jeff held up his hand. "Wait a minute, Barbara. I want to find out something—"

Obviously trying to hurry him away from Eunice, Barbara made a show of being greatly worried about him and attempted to hurry the doctor and the ambulance men. Jeff waved them away impatiently. "Just wait a minute," he told the stretcher bearers. "Now you hold on, Barbara." Turning to Eunice, he asked: "Now what did you mean?"

"Oh, please, Cash, don't play innocent," she said a little impatiently. "You can't keep a thing like that quiet in Hollywood. You don't know this town. Everybody in pictures knows you're out here investigating Continental for the Jordan interests."

JEFF blinked and swung hard, suspicious eyes on Barbara. She blushed and dropped her own eyes, fearfully expecting an angry, humiliating outburst, but she didn't know Jeff. He smelled larceny, and larceny in Hollywood, he suspected, must be along the colossal proportions of buried treasure.

"You must have been doing quite a bit of gossiping," he said quietly.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," she said in startled surprise. Then she took her cue from his words. "I didn't mean to say anything, but I guess I just must have let the cat out of the bag."

Pat Hagan dropped to one knee beside Jeff. "You'd better restrain your little playmate before he kills Mr. David Lozing's son-in-law very dead. He's winding up to plant another one on Grock."

"Jimmy!" Jeff shouted. "Hold it!"

Jimmy dropped his fist to his side in disappointment. "I'm just softening it up for the cops," he said.

Dead silence settled over the whole set.

"Cash, please," Barbara pleaded. "Don't call the police. I'm sure it was an accident—and it would be bad for business. You know what the newspapers would do with a story like this."

Jeff's eyes were hard. "Personally, I think an investigation is warranted," he said. A police investigation at the moment was the farthest thing from his mind. Jeff just wanted to see what effect this would have in the intrigue-ridden studio.

"I have a reason, Cash," Barbara pleaded in a low voice. "Please don't—as a favor to me. I'll explain everything to you when we're alone."

He nodded. "We'll skip the police," he told Jimmy. Noting the relief on the faces all around him, he added: "For the moment." He didn't want anyone feeling too secure.

"Yes, yes—very sensible, Mr. Gorman," Benning Rosswell said, wiping his brow nervously. "It was just an accident—obviously an accident. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I hope you'll be all right."

Pat Hagan grunted. "The place must be jinxed," he said, and Jeff, noting the strained expressions on the faces of the people who overheard the writer's remarks, realized this was a thought which had never been voiced before, but one with which there was silent agreement. "This is the fourth accident in three years involving somebody important in the company," Hagan continued, adding cynically: "Continental's scenery just doesn't seem to be able to avoid falling on people." The writer gave Jeff a long, calculating look. "The other three men weren't so lucky—they were killed."

There was a nervous outbreak of conversation. Jeff and Jimmy exchanged startled glances.

"What happened to the other—" Jeff began, but Hagan was moving off.

"Mr. Hagan," Jeff shouted. Hagan, however, continued toward the door. The writer had heard him, but he ignored the hail.

"I'll get him," Jimmy said, starting after Hagan.

"No," Jeff commanded. "Let him go." Hagan, he realized, had said all he had to say. The writer had given them an unmistakable warning.

CHAPTER III.

WANT OUT, MR. GORMAN?

IN the Continental City Infirmary, Jeff, a bandage around his head and his back and chest a mass of adhesive tape, sat up unhappily in bed and observed Jimmy Ranger's smiling face with disgust.

"What are you looking so happy about?" he demanded.

"Dr. Rose says you'll be O. K. in a few days," Jimmy reported. "Nothing serious the matter."

"Is that so?" Jeff replied irritably. "I feel like I'd been run over by a tank and you tell me there's nothing serious the matter. Where's Barbara Jordan?"

"Out snaffling a few cocktails, I think," Jimmy said. "Probably needs a little Dutch courage before she gets around to explaining things."

"Who's this guy Leffingwell who's waiting to see me?" Jeff asked.

"Continental's lawyer. One of them, anyway."

"He must be the one who follows the ambulance around," Jeff declared morosely. "They must keep him pretty busy, from what that writer, Hagan, said."

Jimmy scowled. "They tried to knock you off."

"But why? I don't even know these people. What could Rosswell and that twerp you were punching around have against me? They never saw me before."

Jeff considered the situation. "The more I think of it, the more I think it must have been an accident. Nobody knew I was going prowling around under that lifeboat. Nobody tried to induce me to walk under there."

"Yeah, that's true," Jimmy Ranger said slowly. "I didn't think of that, but look: If somebody did have a good reason for knocking you off, what a swell opportunity your walk under that rowboat gave them."

Jeff shook his head. "The hell with it," he said. "I like Rosswell, and I think he was telling the truth."

"Grock had the same opportunity and a perfect alibi for an accident," Jimmy pointed out.

"You're right about the alibi," Jeff commented. "Whether it was an accident or not, we couldn't shoot holes in that alibi, so why make a lot of fuss and feathers about it? The attitude we'll adopt is that an accident has occurred."

Jimmy was indignant. "You mean we're just going to let it pass?"

"You can't shoot a gun without ammunition," Jeff pointed out. "There's nothing to be gained by acting like a couple of Donald Ducks. We'll just play our cards close to our vest and see what happens. This looks interesting."

"I suppose our fishing trip is off," Jimmy said, accepting Jeff's decision with unexpected complacency.

Jeff looked at his assistant quizzically. "Two hours ago you couldn't get out of here fast enough because you thought somebody was needling us. Now you know it and you want to stick around. What goes?"

A slow flush began to mount Jimmy's face. "Well . . . ah . . . I'd like to find out what's going on. There's a lot of money in Hollywood. We might find an opportunity to pick up a few dollars."

Jeff's amazement grew. Generally, Jimmy suffered the most acute agonies when anything of a hazardous, speculative nature threatened to involve their bank roll. His disapproval of the majority of Jeff's financial adventures was monumental, his idea of a sound investment being a safe-deposit vault in Fort Knox.

"James, you are lying like a rug," Jeff said. "Give with the truth, sir. Why this sudden fondness for Hollywood—obviously a place of horrible perils, financially and physically?"

Jimmy's blush was now full blown. "Not that it's any of your business, but Eunice Sutton invited me to a dinner party at her place at Malibu when this picture is finished."

Jeff roared with laughter, which he choked off painfully when his back muscles protested. "So that's it!" he exclaimed. "Watch your step, pal."

"Do you want to see this lawyer?" Jimmy asked gruffly.

"Sure, bring him in, Romeo," Jeff said. "Eunice told me she loves fullbacks and prize fighters."

"I was a tackle," Jimmy pointed out.

"Don't worry too much about it," Jeff responded. "She may love tackles best of all. Show in Continental's ambulance chaser."

Mr. Leffingwell was dark and suave. Sympathy rolled forth in sugared phrases as he surveyed Jeff's adhesive condition.

"Thanks," Jeff responded dryly. "What's on your mind?"

Mr. Leffingwell chose his words with caution, watching Jeff's face intently as he spoke. "Mr. Lozing, of course, is most distressed about the accident which befell you, Mr. Gorman. He asked me to tell you that he would call in person as soon as he can. Meanwhile, I wish to speak with regard to the accident in my professional capacity as chief counsel for Continental Pictures. Naturally, I have been informed that your presence in the studio was more or less of a business nature due to your representation of the Jordan interests. However, you are not officially an employee or executive of the corporation—as yet—and, of course, that complicates the situation." Leffingwell paused, but Jeff maintained a discreet silence.

"You understand, of course, that in order to avoid the possibility of just such occurrences as this, ordinary visitors are not permitted the privileges accorded you," Leffingwell continued. "In fact, our insurance policies contain clauses forbidding any such liberties to visitors. Unfortunately, in so far as the insurance company is concerned, you are merely a visitor, and thus the company itself is liable as the result of today's unfortunate accident."

"Indeed?" Jeff said cautiously. Mr. Leffingwell was discussing his client's weak position with amazing frankness.

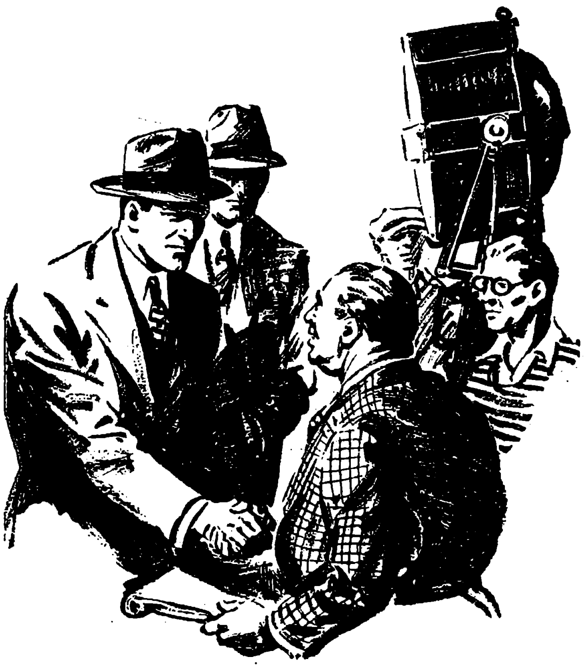
Leffingwell chuckled. "Of course, I wouldn't discuss this matter with you if it were not known that you are more or less one of the family, so to speak."

"I see," said Jeff, who saw nothing whatever.

"Naturally, we are hopeful that under the circumstances you won't file suit against the company," the attorney said, adding shrewdly: "Your principals, I assume, would not look upon such a procedure with favor, inasmuch as such action would undoubtedly be decided in your favor and would represent an additional operating loss as well as publicity of an undesirable nature."

Jimmy Ranger grunted and opened his mouth. Fearful that he might reveal to Leffingwell that there was no reason whatever to prevent them from filing suit, Jeff spoke up quickly: "You may rely upon me to take a sensible attitude, Mr. Leffingwell."

"That's splendid," Leffingwell said. "Splendid." He arose, chuckling once again. "It most certainly is fortunate



Lozing surrendered a plump, soft hand to Jeff. His voice was rather thin and high-pitched.

for us, is it not, that you do represent the Jordan interests? Otherwise we might have to make a settlement that would run up to fifty thousand dollars; possibly more."

Jeff's eyes narrowed. "Isn't it fortunate?" he asked. "A man might be tempted to resign in favor of the fifty thousand dollars."

Leffingwell seemed to find this highly amusing, and Jeff, somewhat painfully, joined him in laughing appreciatively over this little joke.

"Well, I can probably expect to see you again, then, eh, Mr. Gorman?" Leffingwell laughed as he shook hands.

As the door closed behind the lawyer, Ranger made a bewildered gesture with his hands. "What was all that?"

"That, James, was, if I am not seriously mistaken, the offer of a bribe," Jeff answered thoughtfully. "If I resign a position I am believed to hold, Continental will settle with me for this accident for fifty thousand dollars or more."

Jimmy blinked. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's resign this job we don't have and collect the fifty."

Jeff shook his head. "If it's worth fifty thousand dollars to somebody for me not to have a job prowling around in the deficits out here, it ought to be worth more than fifty thousand dollars to *me* to do some prowling. Shag out and get Barbara Jordan!"

"I knew that screwball was—"

"Sh-h-h!" Jeff cautioned him. "Here she is now. Hello, Barbara, we were just wondering where you were."

Barbara looked at Jimmy over a disdainful shoulder. "I heard Mr. Ranger mention me," she said coldly.

Jimmy flushed brick-red, but Jeff gave him no opportunity to stammer an apology, saying: "What's that lovely perfume, Barbara? What kind is it?"

"Don't be obvious," she said irritably. "That's gin, and you know it. You don't have to be so nasty. I was just trying to give you a chance to make some money."

"We've already had a chance to make fifty thousand dollars," Jeff said. He waved Jimmy toward the door. "I'll see you at the hotel tonight if I have to ride down there in the ambulance. Meanwhile, scatter around to the Marine Bank & Trust and talk to Mr. Lee Worthington. He's a friend of mine."

Jimmy nodded. "We'll talk about the weather, I presume."

"No, Mr. Livingston. You'll talk about Continental's deficit," Jeff told him. "Have a nice long talk!"

CHAPTER IV.

GLAMOUR GOES WILD.

BARBARA was at her beautiful best. She smiled affectionately. She murmured sympathy. She patted the pillows behind Jeff's head and tugged at his cover.

"Stop that," Jeff commanded ungratefully. "I'm uncomfortable enough the way I am, and it's a cinch *you* were never a nurse. Sit down and stop clucking. And secondly, this is a business conference."

Apprehensively, Barbara sat down, asking: "What did you mean when you said you had a chance to make fifty thousand dollars?"

"Oh, just a little private matter. It wouldn't interest you," Jeff said. "Now I'm going to tell you what you've been doing to us today."

Barbara stared at him blankly. "You're going to tell *me?*"

He nodded. "Yes. You told Lozing I was out here representing your family's interest, didn't you? What's more, you told him it wasn't supposed to be known; that your uncle Rufus Jordan had employed me to come out here and dig around, implying that he suspected something. Right?"

"Yes, that's right," she admitted.

"What else did you tell him?"

She looked at him nervously. "I told him who you were—that is, about getting Will Drake's racetrack built for him and having that gangster Lias put in jail. And I told him about that milk monopoly you broke up. Please don't be angry with me. I didn't mean to tell him, but he's so smug and hateful that when I saw him this morning I just got mad. I couldn't resist the temptation to scare him."

Jeff, watching her sharply, made an impatient silencing gesture. "You mean this is just something you thought up today on the spur of the moment?"

Barbara nodded. "Yes. I didn't think it would—"

"Nonsense," Jeff snapped. "I'm not a child. You planned this—that's why you came to Los Angeles while I was here. Come on, Miss Jordan, talk a little faster."

Barbara took a deep breath and gave him the works with her big blue eyes. "I hope you won't be angry," she said, placing an appealing hand on his arm. "You see, I didn't mean to tell David Lozing what I did. I just lost my temper. But I did come out here with the idea of trying to get you into the presidency of Continental Pictures."

It was Jeff's turn to be surprised. "What?"

She nodded, venturing timidly. "It's a nice job. It pays seventy-five thousand dollars a year."

"What's the idea?"

Barbara wet her lips, and for the first time since Jeff had met her, she blushed. "Well, I thought if I could help you get the job, you would make me a star."

Jeff thought he was beyond amazement, but he found he wasn't. "Listen, doesn't your uncle own a big hunk of stock in this place?"

Barbara nodded. "I know what you're going to say, but it doesn't work that way. Uncle Rufus won't do anything to help me. David Lozing won't, either. He says the bank won't permit it, but he's the one who told the bank it would be silly to try to star me when the company is losing money. And the bank told Uncle Rufus. He says he couldn't interfere if he wanted to—he's just a stockholder and the bank is the biggest creditor, or something, and runs things. But that's just silly, because David Lozing runs Continental, and everybody knows it."

Jeff sighed. "You mean you couldn't get a part of any kind?"

Barbara looked at him indignantly.

"I don't want a part of *any* kind. I want to be a star."

"There's nothing like starting at the top," Jeff agreed. "Why don't you try financing a picture of your own? You can afford a million, can't you?"

"You don't understand," Barbara said with exasperation. "Uncle Rufus is the trustee of my estate, and he won't let me have the money."

"Well, what the hell do you expect *me* to do?" Jeff asked, slightly exasperated himself. "And just out of curiosity, how the devil do you expect to make me president of Continental Pictures when you confess yourself that the weight you throw around here is strictly featherweight?"

Barbara pouted. "Well, I thought if I could get you interested, you'd figure a way out yourself. Dallas Drake said you could do simply anything with money and people."

"Don't pout," Jeff said. "It doesn't become your Sunday-supplement glamour, darling. Only plump little girls with curls and dimples should pout. Don't tell me you brought me out to this place to look at the actresses in the hopes I'd become excited about pictures!"

"No, not exactly," she admitted. "But I hoped I could get you interested, and then I had a little plan."

"Ah!" said Jeff. "I'll bet it's deep."

"Stop making fun of me!" she exclaimed. "I'm not a financier. How do you expect me to know how to snatch a big corporation when I've never tried before?"

Jeff shrugged his shoulders. "Go ahead, my ebony-haired pirate. What *is* your plan?"

"Well, you know Phineas Gardiner, and so does my uncle, and so does Dallas Drake. And I thought that if you and Dallas would sort of prime him, he'd tell Uncle Rufus what a smart person you are at getting companies out of the red."

"I see!" Jeff exclaimed wryly. "Then Uncle Rufus would immediately rush down to the bank and say, 'Here—this young man ought to be president of Continental Pictures. He doesn't know a camera from a microphone, and that makes him an ideal man for the job!'"

"You make it sound silly, but Mr. Gardiner is a director of the bank, and the bank is hooked, too. Mr. Gardiner told uncle what a good trouble shooter you are, and if they both were plugging for you, the bank might make you president, mightn't it? Mr. Reagan is from the bank, and *he* doesn't know anything about pictures."

"Say, what bank is this—the Standard Trust?"

Barbara nodded.

"Well, Gardiner is a director," Jeff said slowly, turning over the information about Phineas Gardiner, who, he figured, owed him something in the way of a favor, if Phineas could be persuaded to look at the matter in that light. "Maybe you've got something." He shook his head incredulously. "Apparently there isn't anything a gal wouldn't do to become a movie star, is there?"

"Yes," there is," she snapped. "As far as I'm concerned there is, anyway. I wouldn't marry David Lozing."

"Did he ask you?"

"Yes, and he said he'd make me the biggest star in the country." She looked at the crinkling lines around Jeff's eyes, demanding suspiciously. "I *am* beautiful and you know it."

"You'd be a knockout in technicolor," Jeff said diplomatically. "When did dear David propose?"

"Today—the old fool. That's when I lost my temper and told him I might be in pictures sooner than he thought."

Jeff grimaced. "I see. That's when you told him about me, I suppose."

She nodded. "I wanted to scare him. I'm sorry, Cash. Will it hurt, do you think?"

"Hold on," Jeff said hurriedly. "I haven't agreed to anything yet." He inspected her closely. "That's the second time you talked about scaring Lozing—why should it scare him for me to be here representing your uncle?"

"If you had something to hide, wouldn't you be scared if you heard a man with a reputation as a business trouble shooter was coming out secretly to make an investigation?"

Jeff's eyes narrowed with interest. "Now we're getting somewhere. What's Lozing got to hide?"

"I . . . I don't know, Cash. I don't know what it is, but I know he has something," she said earnestly, adding with defiance when she saw the disgusted expression on his face: "I feel it. And he was afraid when I told him about you. I could tell. I hate him. That was no accident today. He tried to kill you." Her voice rose half hysterically. "He told Grock to kill you. I know he did."

"Sh-h," Jeff said. "Snap out of it. Answer me: Why did you scream that he tried to kill me just like he did Rex Jones? Who was Jones?"

HE was astonished to see her begin to cry. "We were engaged. He was a director here. And he didn't trust Lozing either. They never got along together. Lozing was always interfering with his pictures. Then one night while he was working on a picture Rex called me up. He was very excited and he told me he knew he'd been right about Lozing. He said: 'I finally got that grinning old hypocrite where I want him. Your uncle's going to be interested in what I've found out about him.' I never found out what he meant because he said he was in a hurry and would tell me all about it the next night at dinner. In the afternoon one of those big five-thousand-watt lamps fell on him—they were using it overhead to light a scene from above. It was horrible."

Jeff looked at Barbara with suddenly increased respect. Whether she was right or not, he hadn't suspected her capable of any particularly deep or lasting feelings.

"When was this?" he asked.

"Three years ago," she said.

"I'm sorry about it," he said sympathetically, adding: "I wondered why you'd never married."

She looked at him in surprise. "Oh, I've been married and divorced since then—I got my maiden name back with my decree."

Jeff blinked. "Another illusion shot to hell."

"What?"

"Skip it," he said shortly. Barbara confused him. "Who were the other men who got killed here?"

"One was Jason Long. He was an associate producer and he was always fighting with Lozing. He had some kind of a special contract to produce for Continental which had been signed before Lozing became so powerful and he didn't have to knuckle under to him like poor Rex did. He was killed on location in a dynamite explosion that went off too soon."

"And the third?" Jeff inquired.

"Oh, a man named Riley. I didn't know him. He bought things."

"You mean he was the purchasing

agent?" Jeff asked eagerly. Barbara nodded but she knew nothing more about Mr. Riley. Jeff sank back in bed and reviewed matters in his mind, humming softly to himself.

"Don't be funny," Barbara said haughtily.

"What do you mean?"

"Humming that song," she replied indignantly. "'You Ought To Be in Pictures.'"

Jeff started to laugh, but his back reminded him this wasn't his day for amusement. "Do you think you ought to be?"

"Of course I do."

"Can you act?" Jeff asked.

Barbara was scornful. "Of course I can."

"Well, be mad at me," Jeff said. "Rant."

Barbara looked at him in bewilderment and then, seeing that he was serious, she ranted. Even Jeff was alarmed.

"You must have been practicing," he said, holding up a restraining hand. "I never saw so much violence in a glamour girl before. You rant all over."

"I have been practicing—studying, anyway," she informed him. "So I could step right into a part when a suitable one is offered me."

"Your lack of confidence is pathetic," Jeff grinned, "but I admire your ranting no end. Go forth and be mad at Cash Gorman. I am a heel of the first order. A yellow dog, positively. You are going to call your uncle Rufus and tell him all about me. In other words, raise hell. But raise hell with the right people—the ones who will carry the word to David Lozing."

"What am I mad about?" she asked, staring at him in astonishment.

"You are mad because I told you I was thinking of resigning this job I don't have," Jeff remarked.

"Why do you want me to do that?" she asked.

Inconvenienced somewhat by his adhesive tape, Jeff struggled upright in the bed and gave her his best executive glare. "Do you want to be a star?" he demanded. "Do you want to fix Lozing?"

"Yes," she said, startled at the emergence of this stern, commanding figure from the gentle Gorman she was acquainted with.

"Then go out and have a convincing fit and don't ask any questions!"

Picking up the telephone beside his bed after Barbara obediently left to practice her art, Jeff called Jimmy Ranger at the Marine Bank & Trust.

"What did you find out?" he asked his assistant.

"We just started talking," Jimmy complained. "Worthington will be back in a minute if you want to talk to him. I'm in his office."

"Give me a quick résumé."

"Well, Continental deficit for the fiscal year just ended is $3,225,210.95. That's the third successive deficit. Last year it was over four million."

"Tell me, did you find out if this kind of thing is common in the motion-picture industry?" Jeff asked.

"Well, some of the other companies have a bigger one now and then, but Continental positively is the most consistent deficit compiler in town."

"When did all these deficits begin?" Jeff asked. "Was there any connection between the beginning of the defcts and the time that David Lozing was appointed vice president in charge of production?"

"Sweetheart, they have their birthdays together," Jimmy assured him.

"Well . . . well, what do you know

about that?" Jeff said. "Invite that lawyer—Leffingwell—to dinner tonight. We'll eat upstairs in our rooms. I still don't feel so good."

"Maybe he has a dinner date," Jimmy suggested.

"Don't worry about it; he'll come," Jeff replied. "One more thing. Take down this name: Rick Lagoff—you got it? Here's an address: Golden Crest Bar, San Francisco. Call him from a pay station when you leave the bank. Explain who you are and tell him I want to see him at the hotel as soon as he can get here—tonight, if possible. Tell him to charter a plane if he has to and I'll pay him for it. Got it?"

"Right," Jimmy replied. "That all?"

"No," Jeff said. "Tell him to bring a counterfeiter and a forger with him. Good ones!"

CHAPTER V.

SLUSH FUND.

THE waiter bent solicitously over Jeff, who was propped up in a cushion-padded armchair before the dinner table which had been set up in the hotel suite he and Jimmy Ranger occupied.

"Will that be all, sir?"

Jeff nodded and signed the check.

"If you and the other gentleman would be so kind as to move," the waiter said to Leffingwell, "I will remove the table."

Jimmy Ranger started and remained glued to his seat.

"Just leave it here," Jeff directed casually. "You don't mind sitting around this table, do you, Leffingwell? We may need a table here and it's very painful for me to move."

"Not at all, Cash," Leffingwell replied, a chummy atmosphere having been engendered by a good steak and even better brandy. "Not at all."

Jimmy Ranger looked relieved. There was a microphone under the table where Jeff sat.

"I hope you're feeling at your best, Leffingwell," Jeff said, smiling slightly. "I'm afraid I have a slight shock in store for you. Undoubtedly, you realize that, although we certainly enjoy the pleasure of your company, we had an ulterior motive in inviting you here."

Leffingwell nodded, his dark, sardonic face registering polite attention.

"I think I'll be able to withstand a shock," he remarked. "Providing, of course, that it isn't too large a shock."

"Would you consider a fifty-thousand-volt shock too large?" Jeff asked, grinning.

Leffingwell smiled, too. "It's a good round figure."

"Well, I regret to inform you that I am not affiliated with the Jordan interests or with Mr. Rufus Jordan, Barbara Jordan's uncle and trustee of the Jordan estate, in any way."

"That is a shock," Leffingwell said, no surprise whatever showing in his expression. "I fear that I spoke inopportunely this afternoon in revealing Continental's legal position with regard to your unfortunate accident."

"I fear you did," Jeff agreed. He spoke with real sincerity. "In fact, in view of the situation as it now stands, I am compelled to inform you that, due to the injuries I have received, it will be necessary for me to institute suit against Continental for one hundred thousand dollars."

Leffingwell was genuinely startled. "One *hundred* thousand!" he exclaimed. "Hm-m-m! That's a lot of money."

"Well, I haven't consulted with my attorney as yet," Jeff remarked casually. "He might suggest a larger sum in the event a jury trial seemed unavoidable. Without intending any reflection whatever with regard to Continental's physician—Dr. Rose, I think—I consulted Dr. Llewellyn Platte, a friend of my personal physician in San Francisco, and Dr. Platte informed me that it was possible that I had suffered internal injuries of a most serious nature. Of course, that puts a different complexion on the case from my viewpoint."

Jimmy Ranger favored his employer with a sly, sidelong glance. Dr. Platte had indeed said that Jeff might have suffered serious internal injuries, but it had taken a good deal of prodding on Jeff's part to get the doctor to admit that this was always possible in such accidents, but highly improbable in Jeff's own case.

"Yes, I can see that changes the case," Leffingwell said dryly, recalling the excellent dinner which Jeff had eaten and washed down with an entire pot of coffee. "Mr. Lozing wishes, I am sure, to avoid any litigation or unpleasantness of any kind. He is particularly anxious to avoid any unfavorable studio publicity and he fears the unfounded emotional outbursts of this afternoon, which, you realize, resulted from temperament and personal antagonisms—might be repeated in court. Thus, I think that if you would make your demands more reasonable, we could settle this out of court, Mr. Gorman."

"How reasonable?" Jeff asked.

Silently, Leffingwell drew a check from his pocket and tendered it to Jeff, who inspected it casually.

"Fifty thousand dollars," he said. "This is perfectly satisfactory, Mr. Leffingwell. You seem to have anticipated me."

Leffingwell smiled. "I'm always prepared for any eventualities."

"But this is drawn on your firm," Jeff said doubtfully.

"We customarily operate that way," Leffingwell replied blandly. "The majority of motion-picture corporations have their own legal departments, but Continental employs us in that capacity and we maintain an entire separate staff which conducts Continental's routine affairs. Claims such as this, however, are settled directly through our firm. However, I have a release which you will sign, waiving all claims against Continental in return for this payment of fifty thousand dollars."

Jeff nodded. "Certainly. Do you have that with you, also?"

The lawyer drew several papers from his pocket. "Yes, I have," he replied. He looked at Jeff with a smile. "However, prior to making this settlement I must have definite assurance that you no longer represent the Jordan interest. That, of course, would alter the circumstances."

"Of course," Jeff laughed. He unfolded a telegraph blank and read aloud. "This is to Mr. Rufus Jordan: 'I regret to inform you that due to injuries received today and for other reasons of a personal nature it has become impossible for me to represent you or the Jordan family interests here in any capacity whatsoever.' " Jeff held the telegram out to Leffingwell. "I would appreciate it if you would send this off for me on the way home."

Leffingwell arose, smiling broadly. "We understand each other perfectly, I believe, Mr. Gorman." He walked to the telephone. "If I may I will call the hotel stenographer to notarize this agreement. Mr. Ranger will be a satisfactory witness." His call completed, he took a newspaper clipping from his pocket. "There's just one other thing:

this clipping from the *Cinema Daily* reports you are in town representing prominent financial interests. It hints prospective fireworks and executive changes at Continental and mentions the Jordan estate. Would you call and tell them it is incorrect and that you are merely here visiting? I'll get the number."

When Leffingwell had left, Jimmy Ranger turned to Jeff suspiciously. "That was too easy."

Jeff tossed him Leffingwell's check. "Notice anything funny about that?"

Jimmy examined it curiously. "No," he said finally. "Is there?"

"Look at the date."

Jimmy swore. "It's dated the 18th—today's the 20th."

"Exactly," Jeff said. "Dated two days before the accident, in other words."

"I don't get it," Jimmy said. "Why didn't you say something?"

"For fifty thousand dollars, I should argue about dates," Jeff said. "Get me a wheel chair for tomorrow morning and hire a car big enough to put it in. I want to be at that bank at nine o'clock sharp. Get hold of the hotel manager, too, and ask him to troop around there with me. I want to get there before Lozing and Leffingwell find out they have given away fifty thousand dollars for no good reason and stop payment on that check."

"If you can get that much dough by having a lifeboat fall on you, I think I'll go out and look for a battleship to stand under," Jimmy said. "That's the easiest money we ever ran into. When do we go fishing?"

"You missed the point," Jeff said. "If it's worth a fifty-thousand-dollar bribe to keep me from smelling around the Continental lot, there must be something worth while going on there. We are dealing ourselves in—not out. We can do a lot of sniffing on fifty thousand bucks."

Jimmy Ranger frowned. "Uncle Rufus is going to raise seven kinds of hell when he gets that telegram tomorrow morning. And the financial pages of the New York newspapers will probably reprint that piece from the *Cinema Daily.*"

Jeff laughed. "We'll have Leffingwell's check cashed by that time."

"Aren't you a wise guy?" Jimmy snorted. "Did it ever occur to you that when the banks open here at nine o'clock, it's lunch time in New York?"

Jeff started. "Holy Joe! Get Barbara Jordan up here quick!"

CHAPTER VI.

PLAY MAKERS.

DAVID LOZING received his attorney in the study of his Beverly Hills home. In his attitude as he greeted Leffingwell, there was nothing of the benign and fatherly Lozing Jeff had met. The little producer's shoe-button eyes were as hard and uncompromising as granite and his mouth was a thin, selfish line.

"How did it go, Max?" he asked.

Leffingwell helped himself to a handful of Lozing's fifty-cent Havana cigars. "Very smoothly," he answered, tossing across the desk a copy of the telegram which Jeff had given him. "He asked me to send this off for him."

Lozing nodded. "And the item in the *Cinema Daily?*"

Leffingwell nodded. "He squelched that in my presence."

"Good," Lozing declared. "He understands the situation perfectly."

"Yes. Perfectly," Leffingwell reported.

Lozing chuckled. "Good. I knew I figured him correctly—a financial adventurer. He'd be dangerous to have around, but men like that always can be approached. Exactly what was said?"

"Practically nothing was said that had no direct bearing on the accident."

Lozing flushed angrily and threw himself forward in the chair, pounding the desk in front of Leffingwell. "I told you I wanted no mistakes," he shouted. "I wanted him to understand exactly where he stood and the terms on which he was getting the money."

"He did understand exactly," Leffingwell said, unperturbed by the producer's outburst. "It isn't necessary to talk directly to a man like that. As a matter of fact, in this case it would have been suicide."

"What do you mean?" Lozing demanded, his anger giving way to quick alarm.

"He had a dictaphone mike under the table," Leffingwell said, without batting an eye.

Lozing jumped to his feet. "What?" His face was pale. "My God, you didn't say anything that . . . that might be misunderstood."

"I didn't say what you told me to say, if that's what you mean. All we asked about was his unfortunate accident and my unfortunate blunder in having outlined the extent of our liability," Leffingwell replied. "The entire conversation could have been taken down by a court stenographer without any danger to any of us."

Lozing cursed apoplectically. "What the devil did you go through with it for if you knew he had a dictaphone there?"

"Have a drink, Dave. Cool down," Leffingwell said somewhat irritably. "You seem to think that just because this man has been mixed up in some labor brawls and a business or two in which racketeers had an interest that he's a sort of financial roughneck. Nothing could be further from the truth. Of course, he's entirely without scruple and had I said anything he could have used, he would not have hesitated to use it. As it is, I said nothing of any value to him and it wasn't necessary to pat him with a spade to drive the point home. He will bow out quickly and gracefully with an unexpected profit. 'A bird in the hand' is the philosophy of a man like that. He has his bird and he knows it would be dangerous for him to stay here."

Lozing shook his head doubtfully. "But he took the check without question?"

Leffingwell nodded. "Yes, he took the check and he'll be down at the bank at nine o'clock in the morning to cash it."

Lozing chuckled. "Well, it's probably just as well that you handled it the way you did. As soon as he's cashed it in the morning, you can get in touch with him, and if you think he is suffering from any delusions that he can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, just point out the slight error he has made and the consequences to which it might lead. Personally, I believe he should go away and recuperate some place."

Leffingwell laughed. "I don't think we have to worry about his having any misapprehensions on the subject of that check. He knew it was predated. He examined it entirely too casually. The date was the first thing he looked at, and when his assistant started to look it over, he turned it face down for fear the man might note the discrepancy and say something."

Lozing was startled. "I don't like that," he said. "It isn't natural."

Leffingwell waved a quieting hand. "Certainly it's natural for a man like that. He knows we're not giving him fifty thousand dollars out of the goodness of our hearts, with no strings attached. It's better that he have no definite idea as to what the strings might be so long as he knows there are strings on which he could choke if he decided to double-cross us."

Lozing was appeased. "That reminds me. How is his health?"

"If his appetite is any indication," Leffingwell said, "he never was in better health, and Dr. Rose says he will be fully recovered within a few days, except he may be a bit stiff for a while."

"How unfortunate!" Lozing remarked. "My daughters all seem to choose the most stupid husbands. Grock is a terrible director in every way. He has no sense of timing."

"You'll have to admit it was quick thinking on his part," Leffingwell said.

"If it had been ten seconds quicker thinking, we would have been spared all this trouble," Lozing said.

"Well, accidents will happen," Leffingwell laughed. "However, I don't think we'd better have any more around the studio for a while. People might talk."

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEEDLE PROBES.

MR. RUFUS C. JORDAN, according to reports current among the members of his office staff, was a gentleman in whose veins ice water flowed. However, Mr. Jordan was not completely without emotion. Every time steel sold off a point, for instance, Mr. Jordan suffered the agonies of the damned. His was a precise and mathematical mind and, at an early age, the fact had been impressed upon him that his was the duty of adding dollars to the Jordan family's communal funds through wise investment.

Unfortunately, the elders of the Jordans had failed to perceive the depression, and, what with one thing and another, Rufus had added hardly a million to Barbara's trust in a decade. Only one other thing distressed him so much. A broker, whom he had hitherto considered a friend, had once introduced him to a producer and the producer had introduced him to a movie star noted for her "oomph," and when Mr. Jordan returned to his adding machines, he found that he owned forty percent of Continental Pictures, which had yet to pay him a dividend. Without possibility of overstatement, it could be said that Rufus Jordan did not approve of motion pictures. Neither did he approve of his niece Barbara. Mr. Jordan didn't even approve of the Republicans any more. In all New York, it would be difficult to find a more unhappy man than Rufus. His digestion was bad, too.

Mr. Jordan was no happier than customary when he entered his office on the morning of the 21st and was greeted by his secretary bearing a telegram in his hand. "I don't understand this telegram, Mr. Jordan," his secretary said. "It seemed to be important. It's from a Mr. Thomas Jefferson Gorman."

"Never heard of him," said Mr. Jordan, who, in appearance, resembled one of the more dignified and fossilized types of mathematics professors. He glanced at the telegram. He blinked owlishly. He cleared his throat.

"My spectacles," said Mr. Jordan. He adjusted the spectacles and reread

Jeff's telegram. "You may file this under 'miscellaneous,' Mr. Henry," he said finally. "Some type of lunatic, no doubt. It's pleasant, at least, to know he's *not* representing us."

"But he was representing us, wasn't he?" Mr Henry asked.

Mr. Jordan bestowed upon his secretary the same kind of glance he might have bestowed upon his indigestion had he been able to look at it. "I don't appreciate your levity," he said.

His secretary, his face a polite mask and his soul bursting with joy, thrust the financial page of the morning newspaper before his employer, marking a small item entitled, "Continental Shake-up." "Mr. Gorman is mentioned here," he reported.

At mere sight of the headline, Rufus was overcome with an uneasy feeling. An expert in municipal bonds, State bonds, government bonds, corporate bonds and foreign bonds, Mr. Jordan confined his speculative ventures to an occasional wild half-point fling at Telephone or General Electric. That was one reason he was stuck with his Continental shares. He couldn't get rid of them except at a loss and he wouldn't sell at less than he had paid. Never having had a dead horse before, Rufus persisted in awaiting a resurrection where another man might have cut off the harness and gone on his way.

"This man Gorman is an impostor," said Mr. Jordan with cold anger. "Get the Los Angeles police department on the telephone immediately."

Mr. Henry was more practical. "Possibly he's a friend of Miss Barbara's."

Mr. Jordan sighed. There was always Barbara. "What time is it in Los Angeles?" he asked.

"Six fifteen a. m.," he was informed.

"At eight o'clock sharp, Los Angeles time, you will have Miss Jordan on the telephone," said Rufus, settling back to devote himself to an hour of unhappiness over the state of the world and the peculiarities of his niece.

CONSIDERING his infirm condition, the kick which Jeff bestowed upon the shins of Jimmy Ranger was exceptionally vigorous.

"Wake her up," he commanded.

Jimmy grunted indignantly and his heavy lids flew open. "Who the hell do you think you're kicking?" he asked, looking at the clock, which said 5:55 a. m.

"Kicking you," Jeff remarked pleasantly. "Give Barbara another cup of coffee and jolt her awake. The hour of destiny approaches."

Barbara didn't want any more coffee. "I've had three pots of coffee already," she complained.

"Just think how lucky you are," Jeff said. "Even Hitler can't have three pots of coffee."

"He doesn't drink coffee," Barbara pointed out. "And I'm not drinking any more either."

Resplendent in practically nothing whatever, representing an evening gown, which she had been wearing when overtaken by Jimmy Ranger, Barbara reported that she had practically given her life for dear old Continental already, adding: "What I need is a real drink."

"Your uncle Rufus might smell it over the telephone wire," Jeff cautioned. "It's almost nine o'clock. When does he get to the office?"

"At nine one," Barbara reported. "He gives the staff sixty seconds leeway."

"O. K.," Jeff said. "We'll give him fifteen minutes in which to calm his nerves and then you call him. Now you go over in a corner and rehearse your little speech again, Barbara."

Jimmy Ranger was unenthusiastic. "If Uncle Rufus is anything like Barbara says he is, he is not going to fall for this hooey."

"It's only necessary to confuse him," Jeff said. "Nothing is more easily confused than a clear, analytical mind, particularly if it has indigestion. That's why the Germans will never rule the world; they're filled with outward order and inward confusion." He picked up the telephone and placed a call for Mr. Phineas T. Gardiner.

"What's the idea?" Jimmy demanded.

"I'm just going to needle him," Jeff said. "What did you say that deficit was—$3,225,210.95?"

"Yeah—so?"

"And Continental's fixed charges for the current year?"

"Roughly $375,000," Jim said.

Jeff nodded. "A total of $3,600,210.95. Well, baby, that's a lot of money to raise, isn't it?"

Jimmy stared at him. "To raise? What for?"

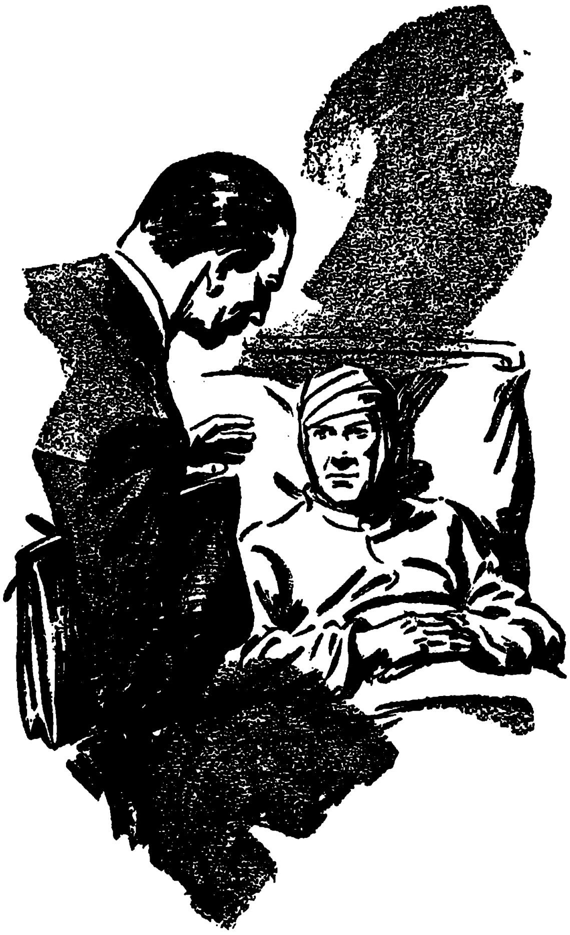
Jeff laughed. "So we can go into the movie business and look for the bodies Brother Lozing is hiding."

"You won't get a dime out of Gardiner," Jimmy said in disgust. "He'll probably wind up selling you a bill of goods—and please don't take any more milk coupons off him."

"Live and learn," Jeff said as the connection was established and beetling-eyebrowed, beefsteak-complexioned Phineas Gardiner picked up the telephone in his New York office, a place only slightly smaller than Grand Central Station.

"What are you selling?" Mr. Gardiner bellowed. "I don't want any."

"I'm not selling," Jeff informed him. "I'm buying."



"I hope you're feeling at your best, Leffingwell," Jeff said. "I have a shock in store for you."

Gardiner's voice was heavy with suspicion. "Buying what?"

"Continental Pictures."

There was a protracted silence on the other end of the telephone. "I knew that buttermilk would get you sooner or later if you drank enough of it," Gardiner said. "What you need is to take up a brandy diet for a few days and get yourself back to normal. You haven't enough money to pay one of those actors for a month."

"Well, that's neither here nor there," Jeff replied. "Out of the goodness of my heart, I'm going to help you make a few dollars for nothing."

"Now I know I don't want any," the financier said flatly.

"Did you see that piece in the papers

this morning?" Jeff asked.

"I did," said Gardiner, "and there's not a word of truth in it."

"Certainly not," Jeff replied. "But outside of you and a few officers of the Standard Trust and Rufus Jordan, who knows it?"

"Keep talking," said Gardiner, a tinge of curiosity in his voice at this faint odor of larceny. "You're paying for the telephone call."

"What's the opening quotation on Continental?" Jeff asked.

"Sixteen and two fifths," Gardiner advised him after a brief pause during which he consulted the tape. "It's worth all of the two fifths."

"Gonna be worth fifty in two months," Jeff told him with a ring of finality in his voice.

"If I wasn't afraid of the Federal Communications Commission, I would tell you in an old Angon-Saxon word of one syllable just what I think of that," Gardiner said.

"As usual, you're wrong," Jeff said politely. "However, what I want you to do this morning is very simple. And it isn't going to cost you a nickel. I want you to go in the market and start buying Continental for me in blocks of one hundred shares until it reaches twenty."

"What's the idea?" Gardiner demanded. "You've got a broker."

"Certainly!" Jeff said. "But I want you to buy it. I'll pay you for it, but I want you to buy in your own name."

"Why?"

"I just have a good reason. Perfectly legal. I was going to let you in on it, but you're not interested, and so I just want you to do me a little favor. You owe me a favor after that milk mess you dropped me into."

"Nuts!" said Gardiner. "Think I want the SEC poking around here? I don't know what you're up to. Let me hear the story and I'll tell you whether I'll do it or not."

"Sorry," Jeff said. "I can't tell you unless you are interested enough to come in on the proposition, but I'll tell you what I will do. You buy that stock on your own account, for yourself, and if you lose anything, I'll make up the loss; but I want you to shove it to twenty as quickly as possible, and you can probably shove it even higher by just dropping a word in the right places that your trouble shooter is out in Hollywood. That's me."

"Trouble shooter, hell!" said Phineas T. "You carry trouble around with you. Who said you were *my* trouble shooter?"

"That's the opinion that seems to be floating around out here," Jeff said. "Well, how about it?"

"How stout is your bank roll?" Gardiner asked.

"Two forty-five," Jeff said. "And it'll be two ninety-five before the morning's over. You really should come out here, Phineas. The stuff grows on trees."

"O. K., I'll buy until it reaches twenty," Gardiner told him. "But I am not passing around word that you're my trouble shooter. I don't want to be associated with you. You're going to land in jail any day now."

"Suit yourself," said Jeff. "Just thought I'd give you a little suggestion to help you make a few more dollars. You know the obvious conclusion people would reach—and that wouldn't hurt your shares."

"Listen! What's this all about?" Gardiner asked.

"Good night, ten minutes after six!" Jeff exclaimed. "Sorry, Phineas, I can't spread this around to people who are not definitely interested in it. Thanks, old man, and good-by," Jeff concluded hurriedly before Gardiner had a further chance to speak.

"He must be full of holes by now," Jimmy Ranger commented. "I never heard such a needling."

"Do him good," said Jeff, who was busy calculating with pad and pencil. "When I asked him to do me a favor, he said, 'Nuts.' I don't think he'd do himself a favor if he didn't think there was a profit in it."

"He sounds just like Uncle Rufus," Barbara remarked, eying the phone nervously as the time for her own telephone call approached.

"No, he's a little different from your uncle Rufus," Jeff told her. "If he thinks a profit can be made, he'll jump into anything with both feet. New industries, inventions, name your own poison. He's an old pirate, but he keeps the money going round and round." He glanced at his watch. "O. K., Bernhardt. Get your uncle Rufus on the phone and make it good!"

UNCLE RUFUS was surprised. "My dear Barbara," he said. "Is it not six sixteen o'clock in Los Angeles? In the morning?"

"Yes," Barbara bubbled. "I don't think I've ever gotten up so early in the morning before. Why, the sun is rising outside the bedroom window and, would you believe it, I've never seen a sunrise in Hollywood before. But I have such wonderful news to tell you I had my maid awaken me at five thirty so I could call you as soon as you reached the office."

"Who is he?" asked Uncle Rufus, expecting the worst.

"Thomas Jefferson Gorman."

Great crises in the life of Uncle Rufus always affected his digestion. He burped. "Pardon me," said Uncle Rufus. "I positively forbid your marriage. I wish to point out to you under the terms of your father's will—"

"Uncle *Rufus!*" Barbara exclaimed. "I'm not going to marry him. He's going to make a picture star of me."

"That's worse," said Uncle Rufus. "I positively forbid you making a spectacle of yourself in this manner." Uncle Rufus remembered the piece in the morning paper with a start. "Who is this man Gorman?"

Barbara's voice was fraught with amazement. "Why, of course, I thought you knew. He's Phineas Gardiner's 'trouble shooter.' You know Mr. Gardiner, don't you?"

"Certainly I know Phineas Gardiner," said Uncle Rufus coldly, who disapproved of speculators in general and Phineas T. in particular. "What's the meaning of this telegram I received this morning?"

"Well, Cash—that's Mr. Gorman—is the man who saved young Will Drake all that money he put into Coral Island racetrack—seven hundred thousand dollars."

Uncle Rufus was impressed. He said, "Ah!"

"Yes, and it was Cash who settled that horrible milk war in Marlborough and sold Phineas Gardiner's company out there at a profit of two million dollars when it was on the verge of bankruptcy."

Two million dollars was not hay. Barbara had Uncle Rufus' undivided attention.

"So when Dallas Drake told me he was coming out here to investigate Continental for Phineas Gardiner, I told her to write him, and I followed him out here and asked him if he would star me in a picture if he investigated Continental."

"What do you mean—'investigated Continental'?" Uncle Rufus demanded.

Barbara was vague. "I don't know, but it's something about a syndicate."

"What?" Rufus Jordan shouted. It was the first time he had shouted since 1929. "A syndicate?"

Barbara's voice was apprehensive. "Is that bad?"

"Stop asking damn-fool questions," shouted Uncle Rufus. "Who's in this syndicate—where did you find out about it?"

Barbara's voice trembled. "Oh, I can't tell you, Uncle Rufus. I promised I wouldn't say anything about it to anybody, but I thought now that there wasn't going to be a syndicate, it wouldn't make any difference."

Uncle Rufus called divine Providence to his aid. "Why isn't there going to be a syndicate any more?" he concluded.

"Because they don't need a syndicate," Barbara said somewhat impatiently. "But I wanted to tell you about my being a movie star—"

"Listen, Barbara," Uncle Rufus said patiently, "I don't give a hoot about that. Why don't they need a syndicate any more?"

Barbara answered with hurried petulance. "Oh, I don't know the details. Cash told me, but I didn't pay much attention to that. He said something about finding out that the company was going to go into bankruptcy, anyway, so they decided to wait for it to collapse."

"O-oh!" Uncle Rufus' voice was very small. His unfortunate venture into the motion-picture industry had left him with eighty thousand shares of Continental, which was forty percent of the outstanding stock. After a time he revived slightly and interrupted Barbara's babble of conversation about her forthcoming stardom to ask: "How is he going to star you in pictures?"

"I just told you," she said. "They are forming a company of their own and—"

"Why?"

"So they can merge it with Continental when it fails."

"What was that telegram about?" Uncle Rufus demanded, returning to the original issue in a slight fog.

"Well, you see, Cash originally had an idea for pulling Continental out of the red, but Mr. Gardiner said he couldn't see any use of getting it out of the red because they could get it cheaper if it failed, and they had an argument. Naturally, I didn't want Cash to just leave the picture business, so I told him that I talked with you and you said to go ahead and you'd back him up. Then Mr. Gardiner called up and they made up again, so he sent you a telegram because he thought you knew about him. I really didn't mean to cause any trouble, but I guess I did, because Cash was very angry with me when it got into the papers. He hardly spoke to me last night because he said it might cost him a hundred thousand dollars."

Uncle Rufus' disgestion was twirling like a top. "What? Why?"

"Because Phineas Gardiner is trying to buy up Continental stock cheap, and he's afraid that the mere rumor that Cash is out here representing Eastern interests will force the price up, or something like that."

"Hold the phone," Uncle Rufus said. Turning to his secretary he demanded: "Continental Pictures!"

"Eighteen three fifths," Mr. Henry replied. "Up two points. Pardon me, nineteen."

Rufus Jordan turned back to the telephone with sudden energy. "Where can I get hold of this young man—what's his name again? Tell him to stop all this immediately. Use your influence. Tell him to call me."

CHAPTER VIII.

WALL STREET IN MOVIES.

AT the close of the morning session, Phineas T. Gardiner stared at the ticker in astonishment. Continental Pictures was up to twenty-four and had shown no signs of falling.

"I believe I had better buy some more of this," Phineas remarked.

"Mr. Gorman on the wire," his secretary told him.

Jeff inquired into the price of the stock and then said: "O. K., Phineas. Thanks a lot. Now, do just two more things for me, will you, please? First, put in a short-sale order on Continental and then just sit at your telephone and await developments. One of the financial writers is going to call you and ask you if you are interested in Continental Pictures, and I want you to tell him that you have no interest whatever in Continental Pictures, and that rumors that a syndicate is being formed with yourself at the head of it and myself as your representative on the coast are absolutely unfounded."

Phineas protested like a stricken steer. "You're going to get me in trouble with the SEC. I know it."

"Stop worrying about the SEC," Jeff said. "All this is the result of coincidence. And as far as the syndicate is concerned, you aren't in on one and I am not your representative out here. You're picking up a few easy chips. Why complain?"

Phineas, however, did not see it in this light.

"O. K.," said Jeff finally. "I'll deal you in when the time is ripe. That is, if you want in. It'll cost you some money, though, but if you don't like the proposition, it's perfectly O. K. We can get all the money we need."

Jeff's next call was to Lincoln Bates, the financial editor of the *Ledger* in New York, to whom he spoke at length and heatedly on the subject of misinformation distributed by the *Cinema Daily*. "It started a lot of rumors going around. I'm not representing anybody out here. Phineas Gardiner hasn't anything to do with it, either."

"There must be some foundation for the story," Bates said.

"All I can say right now, Linc, is that the story as printed was entirely incorrect. Call up Jordan and Gardiner if you don't believe me."

RUFUS JORDAN glowered at the *Ledger* ticker bulletin before him which read: "Phineas T. Gardiner today denied rumors from the coast that a syndicate had been formed with the object of obtaining control of Continental Pictures. In Los Angeles, Thomas Jefferson Gorman, who has recently been closely associated with Gardiner in other ventures, denied that there was any special significance in his presence in that city. Mr. Gorman made a tour of Continental Studios yesterday, accompanied by Miss Barbara Jordan. The *Cinema Daily* said Gorman was reported to be investigating Continental operations at the request of Rufus Jordan, but this was also denied by Mr. Gorman. The New York office of Mr. Jordan stated Mr. Jordan had 'no comment to make.' Continental, long inactive, continued its strong advance today, gaining ten and two fifths points from an opening price of sixteen and two fifths."

"Humph!" said Rufus Jordan. "Mr. Henry, have you been able to check the Continental movement?"

"Yes, sir! I understand reliably that Mr. Phineas Gardiner purchased several large blocks soon after trading began, but is now selling short. The stock is off a point."

"When is the next plane for Los Angeles?"

THE press agent for Atlantic-Pacific Airways in New York was an alert young man who read the newspapers, including the financial page. When the day's passenger-reservation lists revealed that both Phineas T. Gardiner and Rufus Jordan were taking the sleeper plane for Los Angeles, he informed all the editors of the newspapers and press associations forthwith.

By the time the second edition of the Hollywood *Observer News* reached the desk of David Lozing, Continental Pictures, Rufus Jordan, Phineas Gardiner, Thomas Jefferson Gorman and the future of Hollywood's fourth largest studio had become a matter of front-page speculation.

Angrily he telephoned Leffingwell: "We've been double-crossed by that crook. I told you how to handle that, but you had to do it your own way. You have to treat people like him rough, and I'm going to pull the plug on him—today."

"Now calm down, Dave," the lawyer told him. "After all, he has repeatedly denied to the press that he had any connection with Jordan or Gardiner."

"They aren't flying out here for nothing," Lozing shouted. "He took that fifty thousand dollars and went right on about his business."

"He cashed the check," Leffingwell pointed out. "And Gardiner and Jordan might be coming out to find out why he withdrew as their representative."

"I'm going to pull the plug on him anyway," Lozing said. "It's time he knew where he stood."

RICK LAGOFF took a seat opposite Jeff in his hotel room and spread before him a duplicate set of papers.

Jeff inspected them intently while Lagoff, a determined-looking gentleman with a beetling brow and a heavy jaw, turned to wink at his two companions, one of whom was tall and scholarly-looking and excessively pale of countenance, as if he had been confined indoors for a long period; and the other, who was short and squat. The hands of both were sensitive-looking. Both looked on with professional pride as Jeff examined the papers before him.

"I can't tell the difference," Jeff said finally. He frowned. "Maybe they're too perfect?"

Lagoff's tall, scholarly companion waved a long-fingered hand. "No—an expert could detect the difference immediately. The paper is an identical with the original. The letterhead is perfect. But the type of the typewriter is different—the same make, but obviously a different machine if an expert were to examine it with a magnifying glass. To the naked eye, no difference can be noted." The man smiled with conscious pride in his craftsmanship. "I worked three hours on that typewriter, adjusting the keys. In the original machine the A's and Y's were out of line most obviously. I adjusted the A's and Y's on the machine I used to conform almost exactly, but there are three other lesser differences which do not conform at all. They cannot be perceived with the naked eye."

Jeff smiled. "Splendid." He looked at the short man. "How about the signatures?"

The forger nodded jauntily. "You can't tell the difference, and neither could the other guy who signed that paper with you, but a police handwriting expert would spot it right away."

"Good," Jeff said. "What's the bill, Rick?"

Lagoff looked vaguely apprehensive. "You know I been going straight since prohibition. I wouldn't have done this for anybody but you, Cash," he said. "I'm a respectable citizen. And the boys here is on the up, too. We only did this 'cause you said it was strictly legal, but hell's bells, forgery is forgery, no matter how you look at it."

Jeff nodded, addressing the reformed gentlemen of the pen. "Do you think this could be traced to you fellows in any way—I mean, any identifying tricks?"

Both shook their heads. "Naw," the short man said. "We didn't have to do any real detail work. This is kindergarten stuff. Any one of a thousand guys could 'a' did it."

Jeff looked at Rick and smiled reassuringly. "You haven't got anything to worry about then, Rick. Even if it were found out, your position is absolutely legal. You know me."

Rick considered this. "O. K., Cash," he beamed finally. "The job'll cost you five G's."

"A little high," Jeff commented, paying him in cash with five one-thousand-dollar bills. "However, a famous producer we met the other day is financing us, and we won't quibble about prices."

"The famous producer is on the telephone now," Jimmy Ranger told him. "He sounds a little peeved."

Jeff bade Rick Lagoff and his two companions a hurried good-by and answered the phone call from the producer.

"I thought you were leaving town, Mr. Gorman," Mr. Lozing said. He made no effort to conceal his antagonism.

"I was thinking of it," Jeff admitted. "However, several friends of mine in the East apparently became perturbed at the thought and are flying out to see me. I thought I'd wait for them and see what is disturbing them so much. I always find it interesting to chin with old friends."

"I'd like to see you this afternoon in my office," Lozing said. His voice was needle-pointed. "I think you'll find it interesting."

"I'll be right out in my special ambulance. It's built to accommodate a wheel chair and has nice glass side panels so I can take in the sights," Jeff said, winking at Jimmy Ranger. "Of course, the rental is a trifle expensive, but the fifty-thousand-dollar settlement you so kindly made with me permits a few luxuries."

There was a pause at the end of the wire. "What fifty-thousand-dollar settlement?"

"Why, the settlement Continental made with me as the result of my accident," Jeff replied, genuine bewilderment in his voice. He had been expecting the cat to jump, but not in that direction.

"I'm afraid that I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Gorman," Lozing said coldly. "I have had you looked up, and although I understand you have no criminal record, you most certainly have engaged in several matters of a most questionable nature. It surprises me that a man of the standing of Mr. Rufus Jordan would have any dealings with you, and I want you to know that if you are attempting to run any kind of a swindle on Continental Pictures, you are asking for trouble."

"The telephone wire is hardly the place for a discussion of this nature," Jeff said. "I will—"

"*I* have nothing to conceal, Mr. Gorman," Lozing said. "Apparently such is not the case with you, and I intend to see that Mr. Jordan is fully informed if you attempt any of your sleight of hand here."

"I have papers to prove that a fifty-thousand-dollar settlement was made with me, Mr. Lozing," Jeff protested. "I don't understand your attitude, unless your legal department has failed to notify you of the matter."

Lozing laughed. "You must think I am a fool, Mr. Gorman. I was notified this morning by Mr. Leffingwell that a thorough medical examination had showed you were not seriously hurt and that you had agreed to waive charges against us in return for defrayment of medical costs. The entire matter has been turned over to our insurance company, which will contact you; probably today."

"But I have papers—" Jeff began.

"You had best bring them with you," Lozing said dryly.

"I'll send my assistant over to the bank for them right now," Jeff shouted. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, Lozing, but you'd better climb off your horse. Leffingwell signed a full settlement with me and paid it by check."

Lozing laughed contemptuously. "Mr. Gorman, you're dealing with a practical businessman, and you're flirting with jail. Shell games don't work with me. I signed no check for fifty thousand dollars or any other amount in your favor."

"The check was on Leffingwell, Fouche & Leffingwell," Jeff retorted.

"I'm sorry to say that Mr. Leffingwell has no authority to draw checks on behalf of this company. All Continental checks are made out by Continental itself, and must bear three signatures, one of which is mine!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DICTATOR!

JEFF devoted himself to contemplation while his ambulance was summoned.

"All very mysterious," he commented to Jimmy Ranger. "I don't know what they're doing, but I don't think it's nice. Jimmy, see this set of papers with the dirty thumbprint on it?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Those are the genuine papers. Go down to the bank and put them in the safe-deposit vault."

"What about the phony set?"

"Carry them in your pocket when you *leave* the bank," Jeff continued. "Carry them in an outside pocket, conspicuously."

"*Tch-tch,*" Jimmy clucked. "Subterfuge. By the way, do you have any idea what you're doing?"

Jeff shook his head. "No."

"That's swell. It's always nice to know you don't know where you're going," Ranger sighed.

"Why do we have to know what we're doing as long as Lozing and Leffingwell know what they're doing?" Jeff asked. "If we just stir around making trouble and keep our left out, maybe we'll find out what's going on."

"They're going to frame us," Ranger

said reasonably. "Why don't we just take our fifty thousand dollars and go fishing? It would be so much simpler." There were times when his employer got on Jimmy's nerves. "Stop being a mysterious Mortimer, Cash, and tell me what these phony papers are for and why I'm supposed to wear them conspicuously when I leave the bank."

Jeff laughed, then winced as the mirth reacted in his taped-up back muscles. "I regret to say, Mr. R., that as *a Thespian you are not much, and I* don't want you to be self-conscious while performing your mission. To tell the truth, the phony papers are simply a precaution—that good left hand we hope we're keeping out there in front of us while we study Mr. Lozing's ring technique."

"O. K., but look out for a feint," Jimmy said morosely. "Why don't you drop in and see Reagan before you talk with Lozing. After all, he's the president, and a little conversation with him might shed some light."

Jeff frowned. "You're right, but I can't think of any way to do it in time to be helpful today. We haven't any damned business prying around in Continental's affairs, and Reagan's a banker. He'd shell out about as much information as a clam under the circumstances."

"Do you think he knows anything?"

Jeff shook his head. "I doubt it. After all, he's not a picture man. He has to lean heavily on Lozing, and Lozing enjoys an outstanding reputation. Whatever is going on must be a masterpiece in financial juggling or the bank would have discovered it. In other words, it can't be simple embezzlement or anything like that, because the bankers would spot it."

A puzzled frown wrinkled Jimmy's brow. "We don't know anything more about the picture business than Reagan did when he came out here six months ago—probably not a tenth as much. At least he was familiar with the company's finances."

"That's an advantage, I hope," Jeff commented. "We don't give a damn about the picture business and its problems as such. And we're not going to waste any time in trying to find out how to make motion pictures the public will like. Reagan and the bank are worrying about the pictures themselves. All of which would affect the company's earning power. In other words, they're trying to cope with the failure of the company to produce profits on the basis of legitimate reasons while we're looking for a rat hole, and we *know* one exists."

"Yeah—and Lozing knows we know it," Jimmy commented dryly. "I don't like that. Those boys play rough." He shook a bewildered head. "But if they're smart, why did they tip their hand?"

Jeff frowned. "You have me there. I guess Barbara took Lozing by surprise yesterday when she told him that fairy story about us. Whatever he's doing, he's nervous about it, or he wouldn't have moved so fast. Even if what happened to me was an accident, he probably felt he would have us in a position where I could be discredited once I signed that check. It's a cinch he doesn't want any snooping around."

"We always get back to the check," Jimmy commented.

"Why worry, as long as we didn't get the check back," Jeff chuckled. "Roll me down to my private hearse, Jimmy, and then be off for the bank—and take your time. I want to have a nice discussion with the boys before you telephone me."

"Telephone you?" Jimmy asked.

"Why should I telephone you? All you said to do was to bring out the papers."

Jeff nodded solemnly. "One will get you three, however, that you do telephone me."

THERE was none of the fatherly and benign geniality of their first meeting on Lozing's round face as Jeff was shown into his office. His features were set in cold, hard lines, and he inspected his visitor silently as Jeff was wheeled the length of the room in his wheel chair.

"Wait for me in the reception room," Jeff instructed the chauffeur of his ambulance.

No word was spoken as the man withdrew, and Jeff, an expression of pleasant relaxation on his face, inspected Lozing's pretentious office.

The room was huge. Its furniture was Tudor of equally commanding size. At Lozing's back was a window that would not have been out of place in a church of Gothic design, hung with massive red drapes. Lozing himself sat behind an elaborately hand-carved desk of massive proportions. The effect of all this magnificence on the small, rotund man who inhabited the office was ludicrous. It dwarfed him. And Jeff, looking across the desk at the producer, saw that in order to command his desk, Lozing was seated in a chair especially built to an extraordinary height. Such a setting to Jeff spelled vanity and ambition of colossal proportions. He met Lozing's flinty stare and threw back his head, emitting a peal of laughter.

Nothing he could have done would have disconcerted the man opposite him more. David Lozing was accustomed to respect, even awe, in his presence. His frown was intended to frighten and impress. He presumed his recent attitude to have been ominous. His face flushed angrily.

"What are you laughing at, you fool?" he shouted, his voice rising shrilly.

"You," Jeff replied calmly. His favorite reading was military texts which stress the strategy of creating confusion. "You look so ridiculous—like a pea shaking around in a peanut shell. Is that a high chair you're sitting on?"

Lozing beat furiously on the desk, shouting: "You can't talk to me like that—you damned ignoramus! You're nothing but a swindler—a crook!"

Jeff ignored him, twisting somewhat painfully about in his chair and examining the room carefully. "Where's the bust?"

Despite himself, Lozing was unable to prevent himself from asking: "What bust?"

"The bust of Napoleon." Jeff grinned.

Furiously, Lozing pressed down the lever of his inter-office communicating box and shrieked: "Send Leffingwell in here." Turning to Jeff, he shouted: "I'm about to expose you for what you are. I was going to be lenient and permit you to withdraw from this situation, resign and save embarrassment to Mr. Jordan. But not now. You're going to jail—you fool; thinking you can trick me with some petty scheme."

"Careful," Jeff cautioned him. Remember the old blood pressure. You'll pop a valve if you keep that up."

Lozing leaned across his desk and shook a trembling fist at Jeff. "When I get through with you, you'll wish you'd never seen Hollywood. You talked about a settlement paper signed by Leffingwell on behalf of this company. Where is it?"

"My assistant is bringing it out," Jeff

replied. "Sit down, David, old man; you look like a book end leaning across that desk. Tell me, do you ever get lost in here?"

Lozing jumped to his feet and strode to the window, staring out of it with his back turned to Jeff until Leffingwell entered the room.

The attorney smiled cordially at Jeff. "Glad to see you're able to get around, Mr. Gorman. I hope you're feeling better."

Lozing whirled around. "Mr. Leffingwell, did you pay Mr. Gorman fifty thousand dollars yesterday?"

Leffingwell looked from Lozing to Jeff with a well-simulated expression of amazement. "Surely you haven't been discussing our . . . ah . . . transaction with Mr. Lozing, Mr. Gorman?"

"Of course not," Jeff said. "I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

Lozing and Leffingwell both stared at him, and this time their amazement was genuine.

"What?" Lozing demanded. "You told me yourself." Lozing looked uncertainly toward his lawyer.

"Why don't you ask Mr. Leffingwell to sit down, Davey?" Jeff inquired. "He's big enough to fill out the furniture."

Lozing's face flushed apoplectically again. "Damn you!" he shouted. "Leffingwell, did you pay this man fifty thousand dollars? He said you did."

Leffingwell's expression betrayed the fact that he was puzzled and worried about the situation he had found in the room. Apparently, Jeff decided, he had upset the routine planned for his benefit. Leffingwell cleared his throat, staring hard at Lozing who, with an effort, sat down behind his desk and tried to appear businesslike. "Naturally, Mr. Lozing, I'd be glad to tell you anything I could," the lawyer said. "But you're touching upon a confidential matter."

Lozing laughed harshly. "Confidential? Is a fifty-thousand-dollar settlement you are said to have made on behalf of Continental Pictures confidential from me?"

"Your English, Davey—pu-lease," Jeff remonstrated gently.

"I don't understand this, Mr. Lozing," Leffingwell interposed quickly as the producer prepared to rant at Jeff again. "I made no settlement with Mr. Gorman on behalf of Continental Pictures." He turned to Jeff. "What's this all about, Mr. Gorman?"

"I'm just a spectator here," Jeff said. "Go right on with your act, boys. It's a four-star performance, except for Davey—he's dwarfed a little by the scenery."

Leffingwell saw the danger signals flying behind the desk again and once more jumped into the breach, asking: "Are you trying to tell me, Mr. Lozing, that Mr. Gorman insinuated that the check I gave him last night was in settlement of some claim against Continental?"

"So?" Lozing exclaimed triumphantly. "You're admitting you gave him a check. Even my own lawyer is double-crossing me."

"Davey—Davey," Jeff said. "Control yourself—Hester Street is creeping back in your hackcent."

Lozing turned on him vitriolically. "You get out of here, you goniff! *Get out!*"

"Wait a minute, both of you," Leffingwell snapped, glaring at Lozing. "Are you making an accusation against me, Mr. Lozing?"

"Did I tell anybody to settle with him for an accident when we got insurance companies what takes care of suits?"

Lozing demanded. "Why are not you explaining this to me?"

"Yes, tell Davey about the check," Jeff said pleasantly. "As a matter of fact, I'm interested myself."

Leffingwell shot a sharp glance at him and then spoke smoothly to Lozing. "As long as I have Mr. Gorman's permission, I can tell you a part of the story, Mr. Lozing. Naturally, I can't tell you it all out of deference to one of my clients, who, for certain . . . ah . . . services rendered, asked me to make a payment of fifty thousand dollars to Mr. Gorman. My client didn't wish to appear in the transaction personally, and so he requested me to draw the check on my own firm. What all this talk about a settlement with Continental is, I'm sure I'm at a loss to understand."

Lozing, having taken a grip on himself, turned to Jeff with a contemptuous expression. "Now I know you for a swindler, Mr. Gorman. Whatever your little racket is, it won't work." He sneered, adding: "When is your assistant coming with these papers—or isn't he coming, eh? That's more like it. He isn't coming. A little bluff of some kind." He turned back to the lawyer. "Leffingwell, I demand that you tell me who told you to pay Gorman that money—you can see it has something to do with some swindle he's trying to work on Continental."

Jeff spoke up cheerfully. "Go ahead and tell him, Leffingwell. We don't want to keep anything from Davey."

Leffingwell looked at Jeff uncertainly and then shot a harried glance at Lozing. The producer nervously lit a cigarette, demanding: "Well?"

"I'm sorry, David," he said. "Although Mr. Gorman may wish you to know, I'm sure the person for whom I acted wouldn't approve. I have already said too much. The circumstances surrounding the transaction were such that I can say with absolute assurance that my client would not wish them known to anyone."

"So? Something crooked for sure," Lozing said. "Well, some way this sharper, Gorman, is trying to involve Continental Pictures. I can make you tell, Leffingwell. I can swear out a warrant against this Gorman for attempting to swindle Continental Pictures and have you placed on the witness stand—"

Leffingwell started to remonstrate with Lozing, and Jeff laughed. "Who wrote your script, boys?"

The telephone broke up their uncertain silence.

"For you," Lozing said, pushing the instrument toward Jeff.

It was Jimmy. "Jeff, my pocket was picked," he shouted. "Either that or I lost the papers. I can't find them. I had them when I left the bank, but I—"

"All right, Jimmy," Jeff cut in on his distressed-voiced assistant. "I'm glad you telephoned. By the way, you remember what I said about that—"

"Oh, yeah! You gave me three to one I'd phone," Jimmy said slowly. "So my pocket was picked. You expected it?"

"Not exactly, but I was hopeful," Jeff said. "I think you'd better go back to the hotel. Don't bother about the papers." He hung up the receiver and swung around, poker-faced, to say: "Mr. Lozing, in view of your present attitude and the somewhat mysterious attitude of your attorney, I don't feel it advisable right now to show you the papers about which I spoke."

Lozing smiled triumphantly. "That's

good. You 'don't think it's advisable.' You haven't any papers to show us!" His face hardened. "But don't you worry, I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I'm going to expose you. Jordan will be ashamed to be associated with you. Gardiner, too."

Leffingwell coughed. "Don't you think it'd be advisable under the circumstances, Mr. Lozing—that is to say, if I were placed under oath and had to testify concerning this check, it would be very embarrassing to Mr. Jordan to have been associated with Mr. Gorman."

Lozing frowned. "You mean I should think of Jordan's feelings because of his connection with the company—and our personal friendship, of course?"

"Exactly," Leffingwell said. "I would advise you to offer Mr. Gorman an opportunity to withdraw—sever any connection he may have with the Jordan interests, if any, and any associations he might have otherwise have or contemplate having that would lead him to do business with Continental Pictures."

"O. K.," Lozing said after a moment of silence. "Only for Jordan's sake, however." He turned to Jeff. "You heard what Mr. Leffingwell said. You understand you have to clear out entirely."

"I understand perfectly," Jeff remarked, turning from one to the other. "You two crooks have a nice plum here. You don't think I'm going to be satisfied with a piker's piece of it, do you?"

Lozing lost his head. "Listen, you. I've got you framed. Already you're halfway to jail if you don't clear out. I'm going to—"

Leffingwell jumped around the desk and grabbed Lozing's arm. "Shut up, you fool!" he snapped.

Lozing hesitated with his mouth open, finally screaming at Jeff: "Get out of here! *Get out!*"

Jeff's black eyes widened with astonishment as he stared at the two men, Leffingwell still with his hand on Lozing's arm. The light was shining on their faces in such a manner as to bring out each feature distinctly.

"What are you staring at?" Lozing demanded.

"You and Leffingwell," Jeff said. "Are you related?"

Leffingwell laughed. "I must say, Mr. Gorman—"

Jeff was certain he saw a flash of alarm in Lozing's eyes. Studying the features of the men before him, Jeff continued slowly: "I might be willing to make a deal, gentlemen. You know where to reach me if things begin to get too hot for you."

"Just a min—" Lozing started to say.

Leffingwell squeezed his arm in a viselike grip that made the plump little man wince, and said shortly: "My client has nothing further to say to you, Mr. Gorman. You have received some excellent advise which I feel certain you thoroughly understand. I advise you to act upon it. Otherwise the consequences will be exceedingly unpleasant and unprofitable."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jeff saw the door begin to open.

"Something exceedingly unpleasant," Jeff repeated slowly. Then, quickly, he rapped out a question: "Like muscles, perhaps?"

Lozing started to speak, but Leffingwell shook his head, nodding toward the door through which Jeff's wheel-chair attendant was entering the room. Silently they watched him wheeled out of the office, neither replying to his casual, "Au revoir."

CHAPTER X.

AT LIBERTY.

AS Jeff was wheeled toward his waiting ambulance, a female voice hailed him: "Hey, there—wait a minute."

It was Eunice Sutton, attractively clad in next to nothing in the way of a tattered garment. "How's my patient?" she asked, bearing vibrantly down on him.

"Fine," Jeff said, inspecting her dishabille. "I guess I visited the set on the wrong day."

"I just lost my clothes struggling with the elements. Shall I blush?" she asked, peering into the inside of the ambulance. "Where's that man with the muscles?"

Jeff grinned. "I wouldn't let him come out here today. He had a sort of glazed look in his eye last night when we went home, and I thought I'd better keep him out of your way. I'm jealous."

"Oh, yeah?" She ruffled her gold hair and fixed him with a skeptical look. "I can imagine."

Pat Hagan, the writer, ambled around the end of the ambulance and winked at Jeff. "You'd better be nice to him, darling," he told Eunice. "He won't give you that raise you've been after."

"Absolutely not," Jeff agreed, grinning. "She didn't even invite me to her party Saturday night."

"Poof," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. "I knew you'd come anyway if you felt like it." Eagerly she added: "Are you going to be the new president? Did you buy the company?"

Jeff laughed. "Wait a minute," he said. "Rumors fly too fast out here. I haven't a thing to do with the company."

"Stop that," Eunice told him disdainfully. "We're not newspapermen—you can take down your hair with us. After all, we know you've got all the money in Wall Street behind you."

"Didn't Barbara Jordan tell you I'd withdrawn from the situation?" Jeff asked.

"Uh-huh," Eunice replied, seating herself attractively on the steps of the ambulance. "But that was yesterday. Last night your big brute came galloping out to Todd's place and pulled her out of a party in the middle of the night, and this afternoon she told everybody she was going to star in a picture here. Two and two make sixteen."

Jeff reflected that Barbara talked too much, and Pat Hagan grinned, reading his expression. "You could put adhesive tape on her mouth," he suggested, adding: "Here comes Benny Rosswell to apologize for dumping his lifeboat on you."

"Forget it, Benny," Jeff cut off the director when he started to express his regret. "What's the matter with you?"

Rosswell shook a glum head. "Just been looking at some rushes."

"He didn't do it *again?*" Eunice asked.

Hagan, who had something of the look of a shaggy St. Bernard, all but pricked up his ears in interest.

Rosswell nodded sourly. "Hope you get out of the wheel chair soon," he told Jeff, moving off.

"Wait a minute, Benny," Eunice said. "I want to hear more—"

"Have things to do," the director said. "Come along if you want to gossip."

Jeff looked after them. "Who did what again?" he asked Hagan. "What's all the mystery?"

"I could ask you the same question," Hagan grinned. "Are you a Continental executive or is your name Yehudi—the little man who isn't here?"

"I'm not a Continental executive—*yet,*" Jeff replied.

"Like that, huh?" Hagan replied. "Well, well—life is interesting. Rosswell, for instance, has been having a long-term feud with Lozing, who personally reviews all of Rosswell's epics. Benny claims Lozing junks the best takes on the scenes for ones not quite so good, and he's boiling about it."

"Is he right?" Jeff inquired.

"I'm just a hired hand around here," Hagan said. "I punch my typewriter and mind my own business, but Benny has been handling some of our biggest pictures, and they just miss the boat—not colossal flops, but they don't ring that box-office bell, either."

Jeff's eyes brightened. "Tell me more," he said.

Hagan assembled himself from the fender over which he had been draped and consulted his watch. "Possibly it's just my imagination," he remarked, "but people who seem given to long, frank discussions about our lords and masters always seem to have unfortunate things happen to them around here—buildings fall on them. Very unpleasant." He ambled off, grinning over his shoulder. "Don't walk under any ladders."

"Wait a minute, Pat," Jeff called after him. Hagan halted dubiously.

"Is there a large, important gentleman in Hollywood with an impressive chest expansion and a manner which would impress a board of directors at a glance?" Jeff inquired.

"The place is overrun with people like that," Hagan replied.

"Is there one with a reputation as a producer or a former executive of a big company who is—what's the expression, 'at leisure,' and possibly at a low ebb financially.

"Ah, intrigue," Hagan remarked. "Raymond Clairborn—he was one of the biggest men in G-R-B until he was eased out about five years ago."

"For what?" Jeff asked.

Hagan's broad face creased into a wide smile. "For taking a personal interest in young ladies who became, presto-change-o, G-R-B stars. Nobody cared until he ran into a consecutive string of young ladies without box-office appeal. His dignity won't permit him to accept anything but a major position, but I understand his tailor is about to sue him."

"Thanks," Jeff said, looking at Hagan with a speculative eye.

"Under my hat," Hagan said. Smiling at Jeff's surprise, he added: "Don't mind me; I'm really a clairvoyant. I just write stories to make David Lozing mad."

CHAPTER XI.

PHINEAS, THE VILLAIN.

BARBARA JORDAN piloted her glamorous car into a parking space from which she, Jeff and Jimmy Ranger could watch the landing of the incoming sleeper plane from New York.

"I hope Uncle Rufus is in a good humor," she remarked.

"Amen to that," replied Jeff, who had discarded the wheel chair and the ambulance for a cane and Barbara's luxurious automobile. "A small matter of six million dollars depends on it."

"All I hope is that he and Phineas Gardiner haven't been comparing notes on the plane," Jimmy Ranger commented.

Jeff laughed. "They wouldn't trust each other enough for that. Oh! Oh! Here comes the press. Chillun, you don't know nothin'."

An avalanche of reporters and photographers descended upon them, shooting questions and pictures.

"Sorry, boys," Jeff said, grinning. "I really haven't anything to tell you."

"You don't deny that Jordan and Gardiner are coming out here on business connected with Continental Pictures, do you?" a man from *Cinema Daily* asked.

Jeff hesitated. "I'm not in a position to speak for either Mr. Jordan or Mr. Gardiner," he said finally.

"Nice going," Jimmy Ranger muttered cynically. "They all think you're lying."

"*Central News* reports from New York that there is a rumor current in the Street that there is a syndicate being formed to purchase Continental," another reporter said. "How about it, Mr. Gorman?"

"No syndicate has been formed, I can assure you," Jeff said.

"But will it be formed?"

"A syndicate can always be formed." Jeff laughed.

A *Times* man beckoned his photographer. "Take a shot of Miss Jordan, Billy," he commanded. "Give us a smile, Miss Jordan."

Barbara smiled and the photographer shot his picture.

"Thanks, Miss Jordan," the reporter said. "By the way, what's your first picture going to be named?"

"Mr. Gorman hasn't even selected a story," Barbara replied. "But it is going to be all color—"

Jeff reached over and leaned on the horn button, drowning out the remainder of her remark and startling her into silence. "What on earth is the matter?" she demanded.

"I told you that you weren't to speak to reporters," Jeff said angrily. He turned to Ranger. "Hand me my cane, Jimmy—here comes the plane."

The reporters exchanged wise, elated grins as they prepared to follow the trio to the field.

"She couldn't have done that better if we'd rehearsed her," Jimmy chuckled. "The town will be standing on its ear by noon."

"Get to that telephone booth before any of those reporters do, and call McGregor in New York," Jeff said out of the corner of his mouth. "Tell him to buy me ten thousand shares of Continental at the market and start selling in blocks of a thousand shares with each fifth-point gain over a rise of one point. It ought to bounce on the strength of that quote."

With an unconsciously dramatic effect, Rufus Jordan and Phineas T. Gardiner were the last two passengers off the plane. Jeff hurried forward and grasped Phineas' hand warmly.

"What the hell is this, anyway?" Gardiner demanded, surveying the gentlemen of the press with suspicion.

"The old college try," Jeff muttered. "There's a rumor floating around that you're heading up a syndicate to buy Continental and I'm your man Friday. It won't hurt a bit if Jordan gets the same idea."

"This has an odor of larceny about it, Cash," Gardiner said, glowering crustily at Jeff.

"I thought you'd like it," Jeff replied, turning to Jordan, who was submitting to a warm welcome from his niece with an air of austere resignation.

"This is Cash Gorman, Uncle Rufus," Barbara told him.

Jordan extended his hand. "How do you do, Mr. Gorman." He extracted a pocket handkerchief and removed the evidence of Barbara's welcome from his face, commenting irritably, "Just like Indians, these women. The entire race seems to be gradually sinking into barbarism. I do wish you wouldn't kiss me when you have that stuff smeared all over you, Barbara."

Jeff suppressed a belly laugh with an effort. "You know Mr. Gardiner, of course," he said.

Rufus Jordan nodded coldly to Gardiner, who returned his bow with a dour glance.

"We've met," Jordan said. "As a matter of fact, we've been talking on the plane."

An empty feeling manifested itself in the pit of Jeff's stomach, and he threw a wild glance toward Barbara, who, with unexpected intelligence, arose to the occasion and asked, "Oh, how wonderful, Uncle Rufus! Were you talking about Continental?"

Jordan looked at his niece as if she had lost her mind to think that he would so much as mention business of any kind with a man of Phineas T. Gardiner's ilk. "We were talking about stamps," he said shortly.

The press closed in, the *Cinema Daily* man asking Gardiner, "When is your syndicate taking over Continental, Mr. Gardiner?"

Jeff stepped smoothly into this delicate situation, replying, "Mr. Gardiner doesn't wish to talk for publication at this time, gentlemen. However, any rumors you may have heard are entirely premature."

Rufus Jordan was more pointed. "I never talk to newspapermen."

Fortunately for Jeff, the newspapermen gave him no opportunity not to talk, wedging him in expertly, apparently feeling Jordan was a better target than Gardiner, who was bulwarked by Jeff's presence.

"Is the figure correct, Mr. Jordan—an offer of twenty million dollars outright, with the new corporation assuming responsibilities for the company's bonded indebtedness and outstanding liabilities?" the *Times* man asked.

Rufus Jordan stared at him in amazement. "Ridiculous," he snapped. "We had no such figure in mind—" He broke off suddenly and glared nervously around him, finally rasping: "Where's my secretary? Where's the car?" His blue eyes lit on the captain of the air liner. "What do you mean by permitting all these people on the field to pester passengers?"

Jeff, filled with an inward glow of sweet satisfaction, broke a way through the reporters for the party.

"How did it go?" Jimmy Ranger asked when they reached the car.

"Uncle Rufus apparently has been previously shielded from the press," Jeff murmured. "He put his foot in the bucket. Nothing that might be said from here on out will convince anyone that a deal is not on the fire. We should be safe in expecting quick reaction from brother Lozing."

PHINEAS GARDINER settled down comfortably in a secluded corner of the hotel's cocktail lounge.

"Brandy and soda," he told the waiter. "Buttermilk, Cash?"

Jeff nodded, and Phineas ordered buttermilk for his companion, observing grumpily, "I suppose anything can be expected from a man who drinks buttermilk. All right—now what's this all about? And no tricks."

Telling him of his first visit to the Continental lot with Barbara, without mentioning his suspicions concerning the accident, Jeff concluded: "In other words, Miss Jordan inspired Lozing with the misunderstanding that I was representing Rufus Jordan."

Gardiner grunted. "And you did nothing to dispel the fog."

Jeff shrugged. "Nothing I said could have been quoted as affirming anything Miss Jordan told Lozing."

"That's not what I mean, as you very well know," Gardiner said. "Get down to cases, Cash. What's Jordan doing out here? And what's all this hokum you've been throwing out about me?"

"I haven't said a word," Jeff replied innocently. "As a matter of fact, I've consistently denied to everyone—including the press, Lozing and Rufus Jordan—that you had any connection with Continental, or even contemplated one. Of course, I can't be responsible for these rumors."

"No, of course not," Gardiner commented, roaring with laughter. Having already been initiated into the transaction with a stock profit, he was, for him, in good humor. "How did you get Jordan all worked up?"

Jeff explained seriously that Barbara wanted to be in pictures. "I suppose that, having gone as far as she did with Lozing, she probably told her uncle something which led him to believe we were associated in some venture. Knowing Drake, she knows we've been interested in several matters previously."

Gardiner lit a cigarette in silence and then settled his frosty blue eyes on Jeff. "Stop needling me," he said. "What's Rufus Jordan think?"

Jeff grinned. "That I was heading up a syndicate to buy Continental, acting as your representative. That we then made discoveries that Continental was bound to go bust and decided, instead, to form a small production company, partially buy into Continental and place ourselves in a situation where we could force an advantageous merger through your position with the Standard Trust. Jordan called me and asked me not to do anything before we had a chance for conversation when he heard I was in possession of information which would permit Continental to be revived. I, you see, favor putting the company on its feet, while you, on the other hand, want to let it go to pot and pick it up through the merger."

Half amused and half angered, Gardiner commented dryly, "I'm the villain of this piece, huh?"

"But such a nice villain," Jeff commented. "One with whom a compromise might be affected."

"This sounds like too much money to me," Gardiner said warily.

"It won't cost you a nickel," Jeff said. "All I want is the use of your credit. In exchange for that, you not only make a profit from a one-third interest in a new company I plan to form, but you get in on the ground floor of a stock-market rise that might go as high as thirty points. First, however, Jordan has to be convinced."

"I'll play along for the time being," Gardiner said. "What's the rest of it?"

"That's all I can tell you now," Jeff told him. "This thing is so simple that I could deal myself out by just saying one sentence too much. I'm going to have a conference tonight with Jordan. For the moment, all I want him to think is that you and I are prepared to do something independently if he doesn't throw in with us."

"I'm not promising anything, but I'll sit tight," Gardiner said. "What am I supposed to do in the meantime—go look at the scenery?"

"Why, Jimmy Ranger is going out to a party at Eunice Sutton's place," Jeff said casually. "I thought you might like to go along."

Gardiner's blue eyes widened and thawed slightly.

"The movie star?" he asked.

Jeff nodded, devoting his attention to his buttermilk to prevent himself from smiling. Phineas cleared his throat and stroked his beefsteak-red jowls. "That might be interesting," he admitted.

"It will be," Jeff promised him solemnly.

CHAPTER XII.

JEFF PLANTS THE SEED.

RUFUS JORDAN, chaperoned by Mr. Henry, his patient secretary, received Jeff in Barbara Jordan's home. Barbara was there, too.

"Possibly you'd like to run along, my dear," he suggested to Barbara, feeling that the presence of his niece at any serious conference was likely to be a handicap.

"Oh, no," said Barbara, curling up on a love seat. "I wouldn't think of going. You've no idea what a frightful interest I've taken in business, Uncle Rufus. I'm getting to be a regular Hettie Green."

Uncle Rufus blinked painfully at the comparison, and then, viewing Barbara's position on the love seat, which was somewhat careless with regard to the quantity of silk stocking in view, he remarked, "Barbara, your . . . ah . . . posture is unbecoming to a young lady."

"Oh, that's all right, Uncle Rufus. Cash never pays any attention to my legs, anyway," Barbara assured him, completely ignoring the presence of Mr. Henry, in whom ten years as secretary to Rufus Jordan had not spoiled his appreciation of the finer things in life. "I think Cash is a misogin— "He hates women. At least, if he doesn't, he must like blondes, because he admits I'm beautiful and still nothing happens. One reason I want to stay, though, is to prove I'm really interested in business. Yesterday he told me he thought I'd been on a merry-go-round so long I was dizzy. Can you imagine? I can be serious, you know, and—"

"Please, Barbara," Uncle Rufus interposed, holding up a hand for silence. However, he eyed Cash with new appreciation. It was apparent that any young man who considered Barbara to be dizzy and told her so was a person with whom he shared a spiritual tie. Jeff caught Uncle Rufus' expression.

"Why don't you run along to Eunice Sutton's party," he suggested, winking at her. "I'll join you out there later."

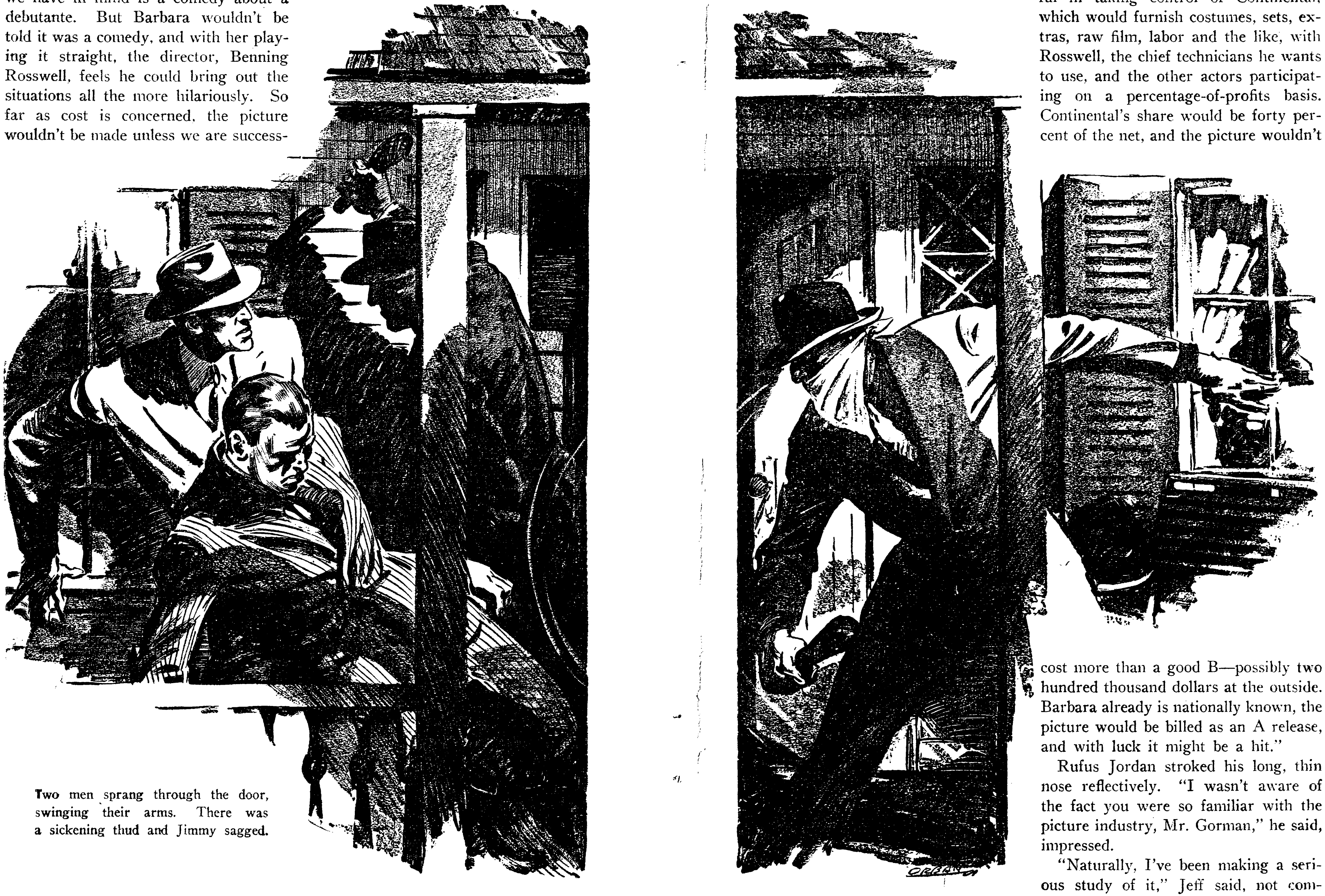
"Oh, all right," she pouted, adding with the utmost seriousness, "But don't you forget about my picture—"

Rufus Jordan stared after his departing niece in amazement, never having witnessed such docile obedience in her before. Turning back to Jeff, he remarked, "Certainly you're not serious about starring her in a picture?"

"Not if you have any objections," Jeff said. "However, it would keep her occupied. You'd be surprised how hard these people have to work out here. I was myself."

"Financially, however, it seems unsound," Jordan said. "Of course, it's none of my affair, and as long as it's almost impossible to keep her from coming out here anyway, she might just as well work, but I was thinking of it from a business standpoint."

Jeff laughed. "Men who know about things like that assure me that, so far as screen appearance is concerned, she'd be a knockout in color, and the story we have in mind is a comedy about a debutante. But Barbara wouldn't be told it was a comedy, and with her playing it straight, the director, Benning Rosswell, feels he could bring out the situations all the more hilariously. So far as cost is concerned, the picture wouldn't be made unless we are successful in taking control of Continental, which would furnish costumes, sets, extras, raw film, labor and the like, with Rosswell, the chief technicians he wants to use, and the other actors participating on a percentage-of-profits basis. Continental's share would be forty percent of the net, and the picture wouldn't cost more than a good B—possibly two hundred thousand dollars at the outside. Barbara already is nationally known, the picture would be billed as an A release, and with luck it might be a hit."



Two men sprang through the door, swinging their arms. There was a sickening thud and Jimmy sagged.

Rufus Jordan stroked his long, thin nose reflectively. "I wasn't aware of the fact you were so familiar with the picture industry, Mr. Gorman," he said, impressed.

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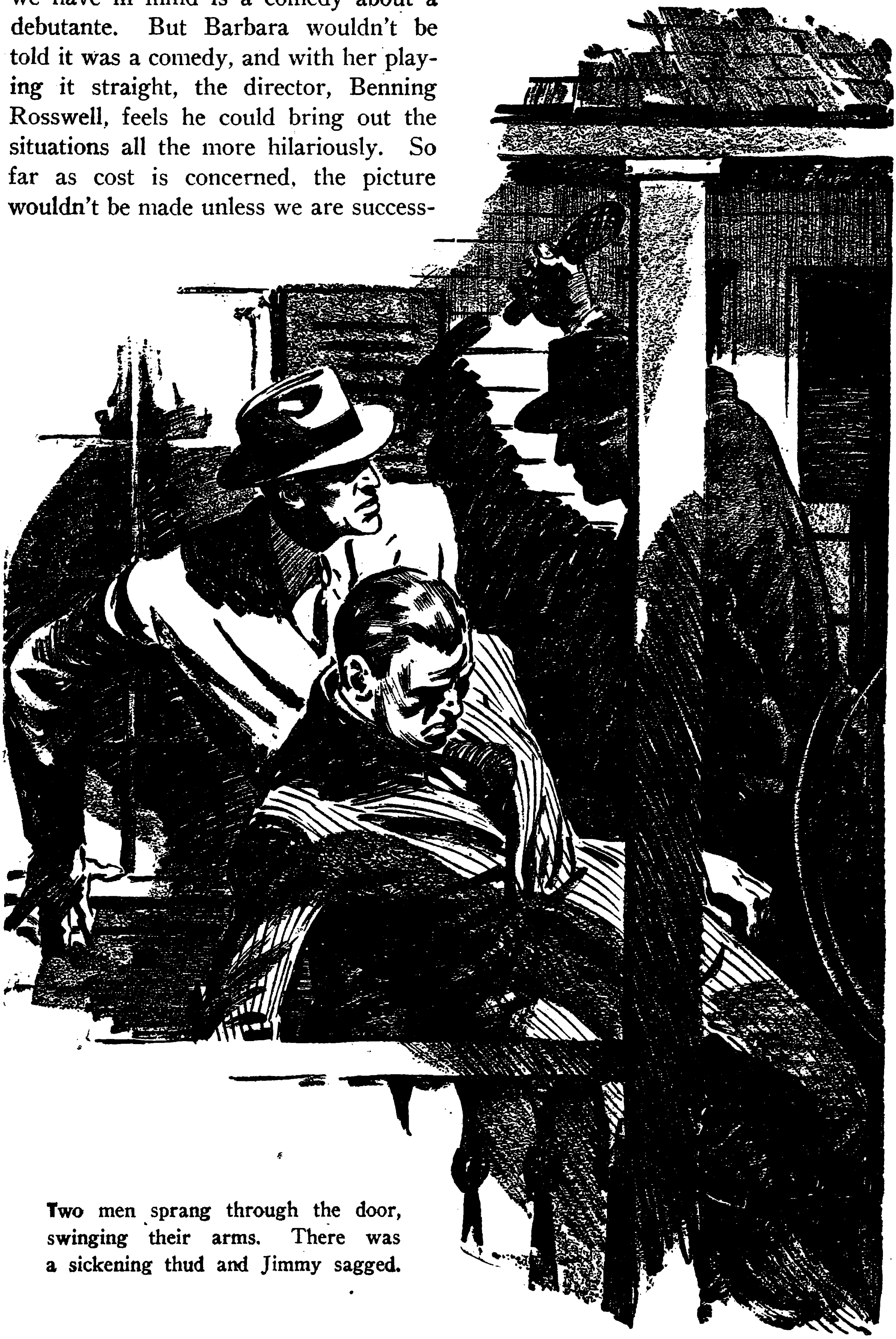

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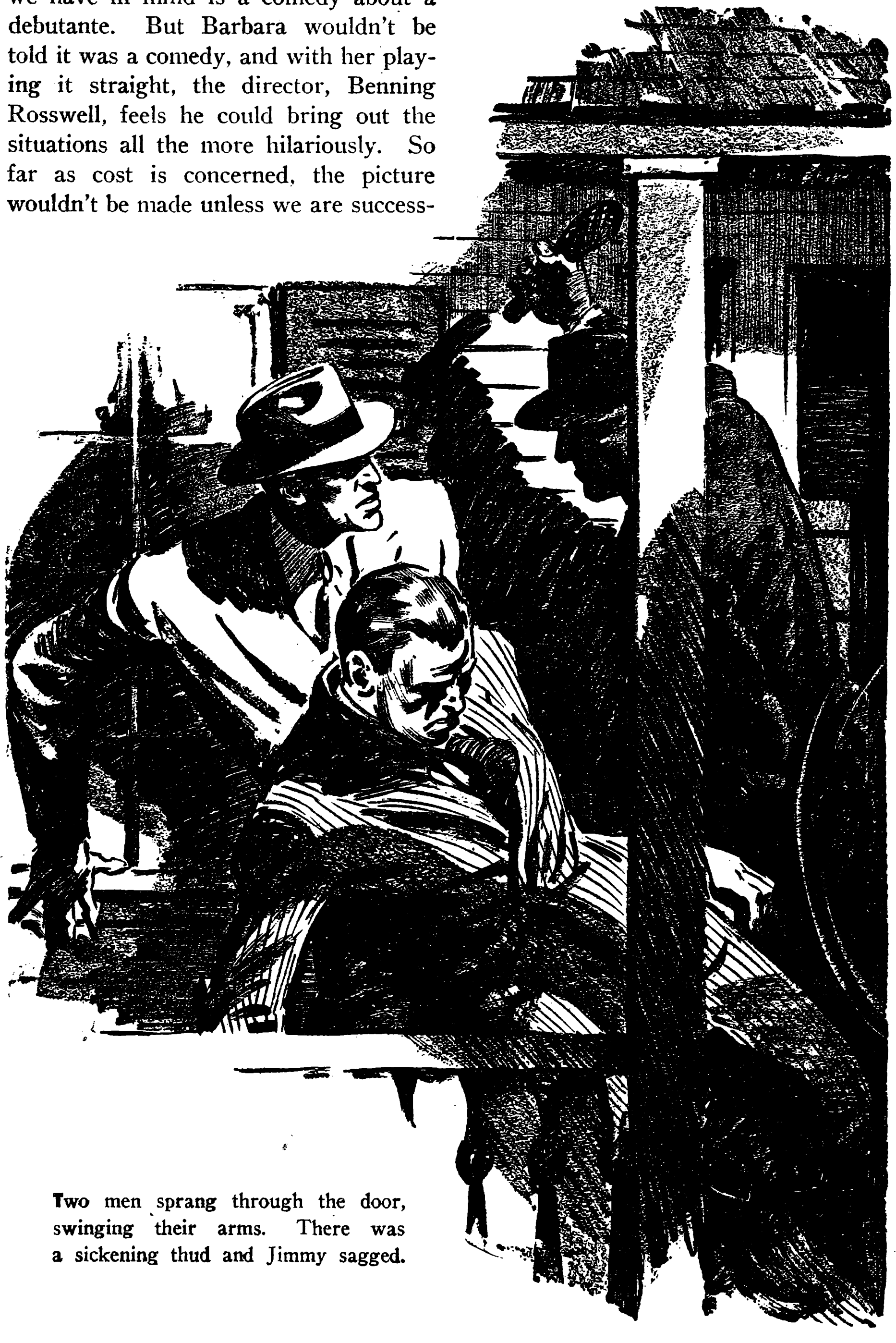

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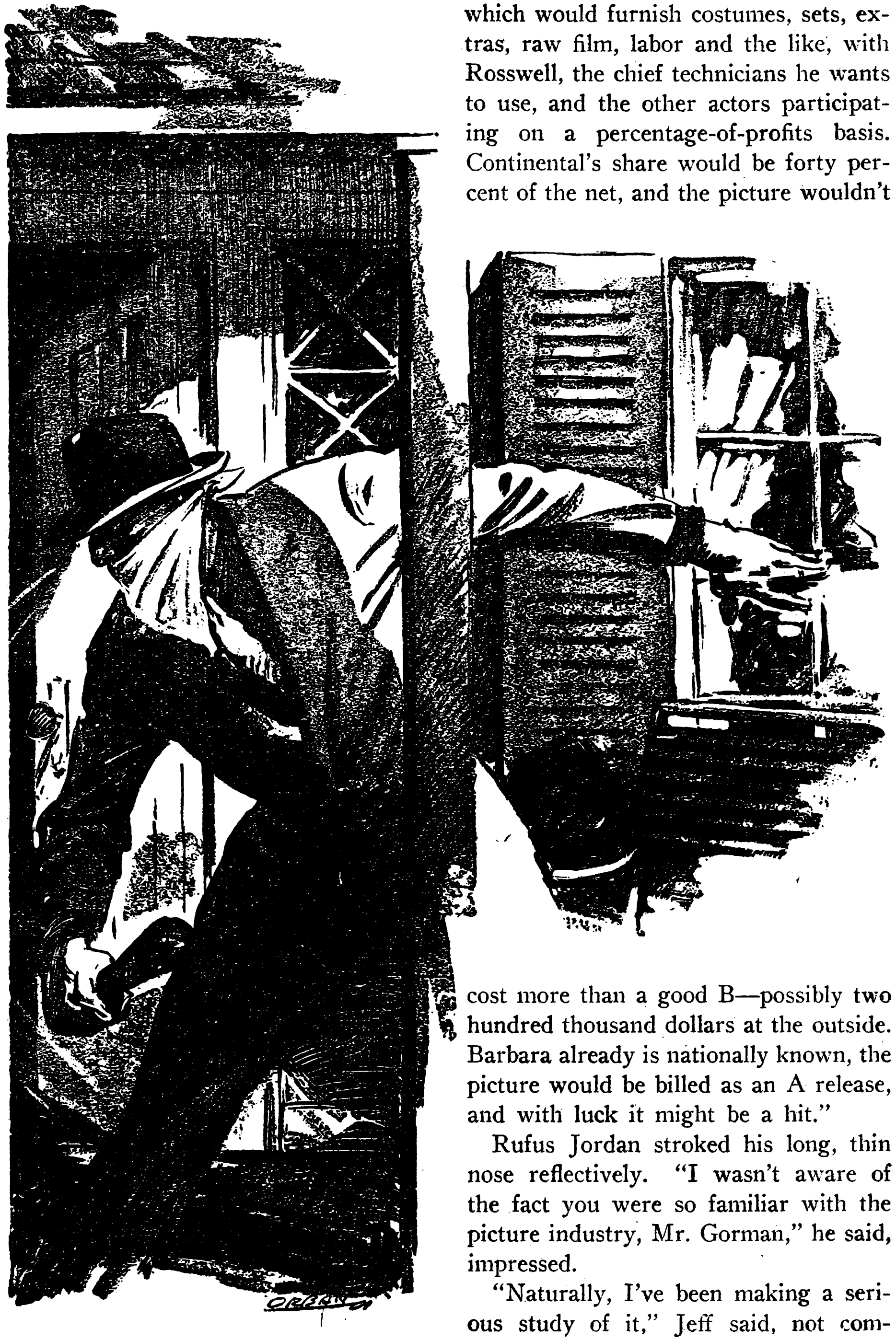

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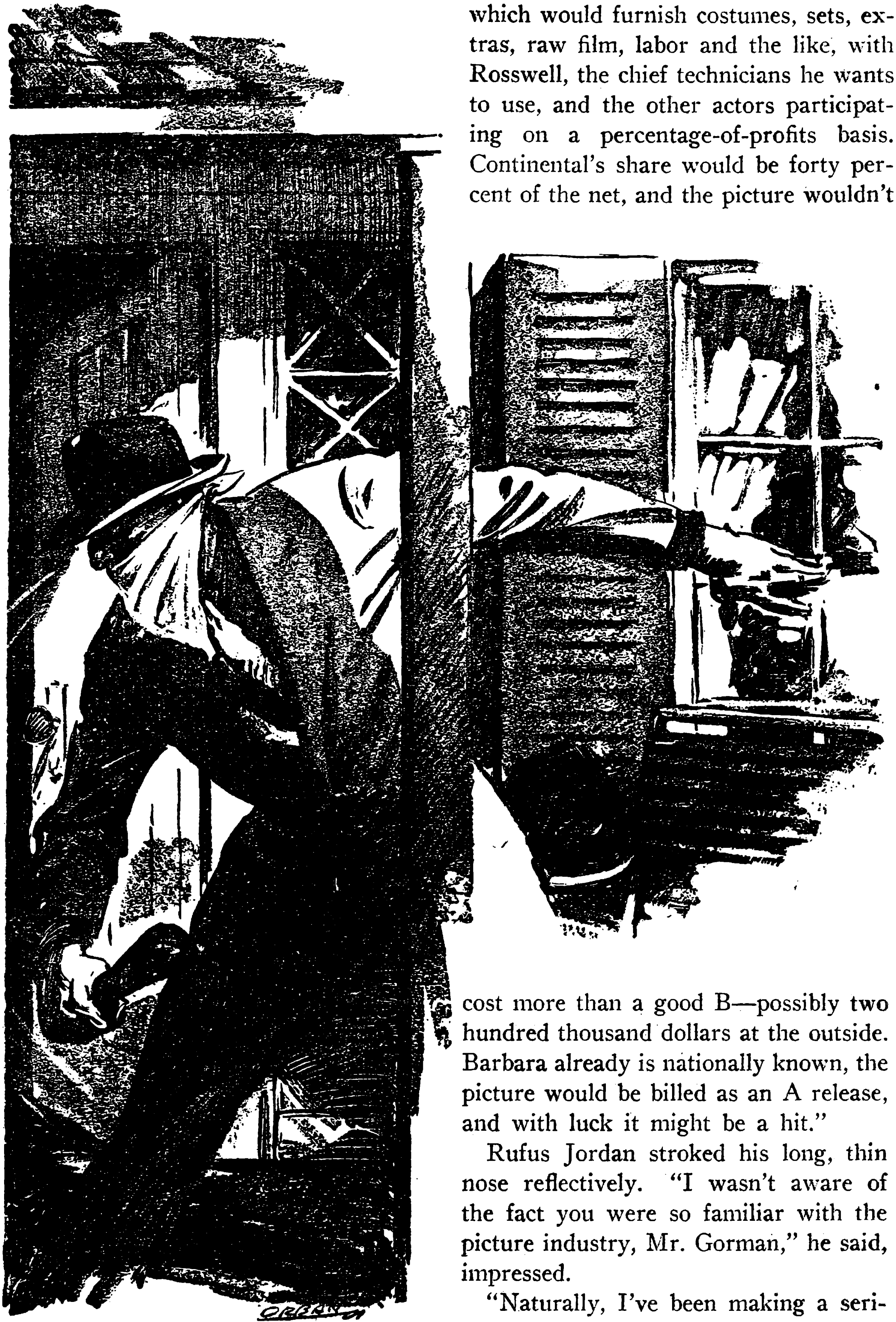

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"Naturally, I've been making a serious study of it," Jeff said, not com-

pletely without truth. "However, I'm fortunate to have as one of my advisers and future associates Raymond Clairborn. You've heard of him, of course."

"Of course," Jordan said, not wishing to display his ignorance about an industry in which he held such an important vested interest. The name did, as a matter of fact, seem vaguely familiar as having an important place in the industry. "You mentioned Benning Rosswell, too. I thought he was one of Continental's directors."

"He has a contract to make four pictures a year with Continental, but otherwise is free," Jeff said. "He has been advising me, too. As a matter of fact, he did the spade work on this co-operative-production idea, getting agreements with the other people involved on an if, as and when basis."

Reflecting that Gorman must command considerable respect in Hollywood, Jordan got down to business. "I understand you think that Continental will eventually be forced through the wringer unless strong corrective measures are taken."

Jeff nodded. "I *know* it."

Jordan considered this news painfully. "What makes you so confident?"

"As much as I would like to, I'm afraid I can't disclose that at the present time," Jeff replied slowly. Then, with a great show of frankness, he added: "To be perfectly truthful, my associates and myself see an opportunity to make a very considerable profit out of Continental Pictures—possibly millions."

Jordan caressed his aristocratic nose. "Couldn't this be done without . . . ah . . . impairment of the company's present financial structure?"

"Yes, it *could* be done," Jeff agreed. "I *originally* favored such a plan myself. However, it would require a tremendous sum of money—particularly in view of the position occupied by the bank and the leak which resulted in the rapid gain of Continental's stock."

"Well, if I was convinced that the circumstances justified it, I might throw my support to you and your associates," Jordan suggested cautiously.

"Thanks," Jeff said. He smiled. "However, our motives quite naturally are selfish. Your stock would be of great assistance in gaining control of the company, but it would hardly pay us to establish the company in a position where it would be paying dividends on stock which didn't belong to us."

Jordan drummed thoughtfully on the edge of his chair with his fingers. "It would seem to me that there should be some way in which we might align ourselves to our mutual benefit," he mused, adding hurriedly: "In the event, of course, that I consider such action advisable when I'm in full possession of all the facts."

This was the moment Jeff had been waiting for, but he strove to remain casual. "There is a way, as a matter of fact," he said slowly. Jordan fixed him with a cool, wary gaze, maintaining an attentive silence.

"You see," Jeff continued, "I hold the key to this situation. I know precisely what is wrong with the company. Not even my associates are in possession of the full facts." He leaned forward intently. "I'll put my chips down. I have only about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars available for the investment in anything undertaken here. Under any other plan except the one I am about to outline, my profit would be limited in proportion to my investment to the total amount necessary. Not entirely, you understand, due to my position—but to a considerable extent. Under the plan I propose, however, I could profit to a much greater extent, and both you and my associates would enjoy a handsome profit. But I would have to have outside support in order to bring about the acquiescence of my present connections. They don't want anybody else in."

Jordan looked at him sharply. "But I understood you were Gardiner's man out here—"

Jeff shook his head. "That's a common misapprehension due to the fact that over the past several months we have been associated in several ventures together. Those associations, however, were voluntary and concerned only the specific ventures in question at the time. I am completely a free agent."

"Ah," Jordan commented. His interest was noticeably quickening. "What is this plan?"

Jeff leaned forward once again and, using his fingers as counters, explained: "In brief, the formation of a management company to be called Motion Picture Management Co., which would approach the directors of Continental Pictures and the Standard Bank & Trust Co. with the following proposition: First, to assume complete responsibility for the management of Continental Pictures with full authority for the operation for one year; second, we would guarantee to make up the gross operating deficit, if any; third, we would have an option to renew under the same terms for a ten-year period. From the standpoint of the stockholders and the bank, the proposition should be irresistible. They would be guaranteed against loss during a year when, in view of past performance and present indications, there is every expectance of another serious deficit."

Jordan stared at him. "Do you mean to say you are confident that you can put Continental on a paying basis within *twelve* months?"

Jeff nodded. "Absolutely!"

"How much of an investment would you require?"

"In actual cash, nothing," Jeff said. "I would invest two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the management company myself, which would be more than sufficient to meet any operating expense, because, with the exception of one executive salary and a small clerical staff and legal expenses, it would have no need for funds. However, you and my other associates would have to guarantee against operating losses—that would require the posting of securities to the extent of six million dollars, of which your share would be three million. That should be adequate to meet the demands of the bank and the company, as the largest deficit to date has been approximately five million dollars, and the fixed obligation we would guarantee to meet would come to about seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Jordan raised his eyebrows. "That's a large sum."

"It is," Jeff agreed. "However, the mere negotiation of such an agreement would send the stock, already advancing, to a much higher figure, and when it became apparent that a profit might be paid this year, or, at worst, if there was a small loss with every expectation of a profit next year, the stock would advance very sharply—so much so that you could yourself, if you wished, be able, by judicious selling, to unload your own holdings at a profit above their purchase price."

Jordan cleared his throat uneasily as he recalled the conditions under which he had bought into Continental, and then considered Jeff's proposition in silence for several minutes. "Naturally, I will have to have all the facts before I can make a decision."

"Certainly," Jeff said. "However, for me to give you that information without certain guarantees would be foolhardy on my part. You could take independent action."

"What guarantees?"

"An agreement that you would agree to participate in the management company in the manner I described if you found the facts warranted such action, and formed, in your opinion, the basis of a profitable transaction."

Jordan considered this, looking for the first time toward Mr. Henry, who was listening wide-eyed to the conversation. "It's a rather delicate matter," he said finally. "However, it's a fair offer. I will request my attorneys to fly here tomorrow and meet with your own—"

"That isn't necessary," Jeff said. He smiled widely. "I'll accept your word that you'll play good cricket."

Jordan's eyes opened in astonishment. "Thank you," he said simply.

"Roughly, the situation is this," Jeff said. "There is nothing the matter with Continental Pictures fundamentally. The company could and would be making money were it not for one fact: it is being milked from within. A gigantic swindle is taking place. David Lozing is a thief—an outright crook."

"What?" Jordan wet his lips and stared at Jeff.

"Absolutely," Jeff said. He explained the attempt on his life. The attempted bribe. The denial of the transaction with regard to the accident settlement. The death of Rex Jones, as Barbara had related it. Hagan's remarks. The opinions of Rosswell and others that extravagant feature pictures were being systematically sabotaged in the cutting room.

"But this is fantastic," Jordan exclaimed. He repeated Lozing's record, the esteem in which the man was held. "I . . . I find your accusations very hard to believe."

Jeff showed him the original accident-settlement papers and ran off the dictaphone record of his conversation with Leffingwell.

Jordan seemed bewildered, even suspicious.

"No one would have believed the Donald Coster incident," Jeff pointed out. "And for an even more fantastic case, there is the story of Kreuger—the Swedish match king."

Jordan nodded. "But still, you have little more than suspicions as to what is happening within the company. And, please forgive my skepticism, but these papers—"

"Might be forgeries," Jeff smiled. "Also the dictaphone record. I don't blame you. However, if I can prove conclusively that this is the truth—in other words, that Lozing is a master thief, will you support me?"

"Yes," Jordan said without hesitation. Then a second thought occurred to him. "Wouldn't it be a matter for the police or the district attorney?"

"Eventually," Jeff agreed. "First, however, it's essential that our management company move in. Once we handcuff Lozing within the company we can take our time and get all the goods on him; possibly obtaining restitution in part. In addition, once we have eliminated Lozing and his confederates, the essential fault within the company will have been remedied. Then you'll make money both ways. Your stock will increase in value, and it will be to the advantage of the company to buy up our ten-year management option for a good round sum when it is seen that there are actually to be profits."

Jordan smiled. "Yes, of course. One thing, however, puzzles me—presuming you are correct. Why would Lozing wish to lower the potential value of pictures by what you termed 'sabotage in the cutting room.' I should think he would want the company to make as much as possible, the more to steal—also, the better the company's gross on pictures, the less possibility there would be for changes that might affect his status."

"Maybe he wants to obtain control of the company," Jeff said. "Possibly he has stolen so much he could afford to take over Continental with its own money if it went through the wringer."

Jordan considered this. "Yes, that might be it." He arose, extending his hand. "Prove your case beyond any doubt and I'll support you."

"Thanks," Jeff replied. "There's just one more thing. The quickest way to get action is to force him to show his own hand. Undoubtedly he will contact you very soon. Tomorrow morning or even tonight. He will attempt to discredit me. Say nothing about the papers I hold or the dictaphone record. He doesn't know what connection there is between yourself, myself and Phineas Gardiner, but he is certain that I am the agent of one or both of you. Encourage that belief. Maintain a position that my veracity is beyond suspicion so far as you are concerned. As he presses his contention, finally become doubtful, but state that you would never believe any such thing without absolute proof."

"Very well," Jordan said slowly. "I'll do it." He eyed Jeff with sudden coolness. "However, it would be very unpleasant for you, Mr. Gorman, if he were able to maintain his position!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TOO HOT TO PUBLISH.

JEFF heard the party at Eunice Sutton's place even before he saw the house, which was located on a strip of land beside the sea. Tired by the activities of his first day afoot since the accident, Jeff, on noting a piazza along the side of the house which seemed quiet and deserted, made for it to rest for a few moments and review the situation, almost falling over Pat Hagan as he mounted the flagstone steps.

"Hello, Cash," the writer greeted him. "Sit down and make with comfort."

Cash eased himself down beside Hagan, inquiring: "Do you always sit on steps?"

"Whenever possible," Hagan replied, the glow from his cigarette lighting his broad face and revealing a wide grin. "It's an old habit I acquired in Chicago sitting on fire escapes in my youth. How goes the battle of bank rolls?"

"Passing fair," Jeff replied. "Have you seen Phineas Gardiner around any place?"

"I was even introduced to the great man," Hagan replied. "The introducer said, 'This is Pat Hagan, the writer.' Phineas said, 'Humph.' Friendly soul. Treats everyone as if they were trying to steal something from him."

Jeff laughed. "Practically everyone is."

"Tell me," Hagan asked, "is it roast beef for breakfast or that brandy which gives him those drooping red jowls?"

"In his own way, Phineas is a noble character," Jeff grinned. "Is he disporting himself as if he were having a good time?"

"He seems to be greatly intrigued with the feminine pulchritude and earthly wit of Miss Eunice Sutton, golden-haired peasant of the banks of the Wabash, if that's what you mean," Hagan answered. "Miss Sutton, I might add, is doing nothing to discourage your ruddy-complexioned bankbook from entertaining hopeful and, I assume, strictly dishonorable intentions." Hagan lit another cigarette from the butt of his old one. "By the way, Cash, does the history of the Middle Ages appeal to you?"

"Yes, I like any kind of history," Jeff answered, puzzled at this turn of the conversation. "Why?"

"I just wondered if you were familiar with the lives and accomplishments of Machiavelli and the Borgias?"

Jeff chuckled. "My favorite reading."

"That's what I thought," Hagan said. "Do I detect your fine Italian hand in l'affaire Sutton?"

"I'm afraid you have a very much misguided impression of me," Jeff laughed. "By the way, what's your idea of what's wrong out at Continental?"

"Ah, so we're back to that again?" Hagan replied, sighing. "I do wish you'd tell me what you're about. It would make such an interesting story to tell my grandchildren."

"Are you evading my question?" Jeff asked.

"You evaded mine," Hagan replied. "If I must take my hair down, I will give you my philosophy of life, Cash: never bet on a horse without information right from the feed box about the winner. Just at present, it would be impolite of me—I think impolitic is a better word—to exercise my suspicions toward the hand which is feeding me in a style to which I have become accustomed. In addition, they are but suspicions. Even I can be wrong, incredible as the idea may seem at first hand."

Jeff would have given a lot to find out what Hagan knew or what he suspected. The writer's statement that he had only suspicions was probably correct, but even his suspicions might furnish a valuable lead as to the drain down which Continental's money was flowing. Hagan's inclinations were friendly but Jeff realized that the writer was not to be drawn out. Jeff, as always, was frank with himself and he didn't blame Hagan for his attitude. Others might be fooled but Hagan realized that there was a great deal of "behind-the-scene" maneuvering going on in Jeff's own camp and that Jeff's position was far from firmly established. Airing his opinions might lead only to trouble for the writer, as Hagan himself was well aware.

Jeff stretched, flexing the tired muscles of his back, and arose. "You ought to write a book," he said casually to Hagan.

"I did write a book," Hagan replied. "That's why I'm out here."

"Oh, I meant a new book," Jeff said. "I was thinking of a book with a special treatment that I'd be interested in buying if, as and when I jump into the saddle out at Continental. I might pay fifty thousand dollars for the picture rights to this book I have in mind."

Hagan flipped his cigarette away and lit a fresh one. "Sit down," he said. "I'm always interested in knowing the kind of books movie brass hats or even prospective movie brass hats would like to have written—their ideas are usually so colossally lousy."

Jeff laughed and resumed his seat beside Hagan on the steps. "This would be a book about the motion-picture industry. It would be filled with murder, beautifully disguised, and intrigue. The villain would be a producer who was skillfully milking the company for mysterious purposes of his own."

"A very fascinating subject," Hagan said softly. He was silent for a moment and Jeff felt the writer studying him by the light of the moon. Finally, Hagan spoke again. "You've bought a book."

"Good," Jeff said eagerly. "How soon can you finish it? Just an outline will be enough as far as I'm concerned."

"Not so fast, my friend," Hagan replied. "The day you take control out at Continental, the manuscript will be delivered to your desk—complete!"

Jeff was startled. "You sound as if you already had written it."

Hagan's cigarette glowed, lighting up his features, and Jeff was amazed to see the change which had come over them—harsh and hard; the expression of a man who was nursing a deep hatred.

"I have written it," Hagan replied quietly. "That is, it's practically completed. One more chapter and a few loose ends to be cleaned up." He turned his steady gray eyes on Jeff. "Rex Jones was my cousin."

"I see," Jeff said softly. "I didn't know that."

"Very few people do," Hagan replied. "Our parents had houses next door to each other back home. Rex and I were considerably closer than most brothers. He was my best friend. After college, you see, we went our separate ways—I on a newspaper and Rex to the stage. Then he came out here and arrived as a director just about the time I wrote 'My Heart Is in a Holiday.' I sent him the manuscript before the book was published and he got Continental to buy it and later they hired me. Rex was killed before I got here."

Hagan related this in a matter-of-fact tone, but Jeff sensed the smoldering tension behind the words.

"Our motives are different, but we're working toward the same end," Jeff said. "Why don't you let me have that manuscript now—tonight or tomorrow morning. I'll give you seventy-five thousand dollars in cash—payable Monday."

Hagan shook his head. "No. Sorry, Cash. I can't put that manuscript into your hands until I know exactly where you stand. You're wriggling around too much. You don't have control of Continental yet. You're just trying to get it. You want information from everyone, but you're not passing out any yourself. I didn't write that story to

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Hagan's voice became harsh. "You get it when you step into Continental, but on one condition. You have to have it published—even if it's necessary to defray the cost of publishing it yourself. And you have to have it published before you act on the information it contains. It's written as fiction, but every word is fact. In other words, while you are having the information checked, the book appears. Because of certain situations and characterizations, it's a hot book. Possibly too hot for regular publishers. That's why I make the provision that you publish it. Certain people will be easily recognized. I want them to sweat and sweat hard while they wait for the ax to fall. I want to see the rats deserting the ship—"

An exultant thrill shot through Jeff. "Listen, Pat," he said tensely. "Give me your address. In the morning I'll be out to see you. I'll put all my cards on the table. We can work together. I mean it."

"O. K., I'll listen," the writer said. "I'm not promising anything, but I'll be home about noon. Don't laugh, but I go to church on Sundays." He extended a card. "There's my address."

"Great," Jeff said, getting up. "You coming inside?"

"No, there's a lady—Indian—in there that wants to scalp me and I don't feel like being scalped tonight," Hagan said. "See you—"

He broke off suddenly. From the garden flanking the piazza there was the crack of a broken twig. With speed of movement incredible in a man so big, Hagan was on his feet. He plunged into the garden, returning after a moment of search.

"I thought I heard footsteps out there," he said, looking around nervously. Laughing, he added: "That's what working on Bell Wainwright's mystery stories does to you, I guess. It's funny, though," He shook his head. "See you later if you don't get trampled underfoot in the riot within."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PART HAGAN NEVER WROTE!

WHEN Eunice Sutton gave a party, there wasn't much organization to it but apparently everybody had a good time. Jeff steered his course by ear, finally locating the center of activities in a room which opened out onto a terrace and which might, under ordinary circumstances, have been considered sizable but at the moment was considerably too small for the festivities taking place within it.

A recording machine was giving off with a conga from some place but this had no effect on a small but devoted group in the corner nearest the door by which Jeff entered, their attention being centered on a pair of dice. Two gentlemen nearby, their elbows supported by a portable bar, were strenuously engaged in an Indian wrestling match much to the annoyance of a solemn and solitary citizen who was attempting to utilize the other end of the bar as a foundation for something he was building with matches.

Even surpassing the effort being put into the Indian wrestling was a conga line which snaked and bumped its way past Jeff with unparalleled vigor.

"Are you looking for somebody, or are you one of the inmates of this madhouse?" a voice asked at his elbow. It was Benning Rosswell.

"Hello, Benny," Jeff laughed. "Have you seen either Jimmy Ranger or Phineas Gardiner? Or do you know Gardiner?"

"Oh, indeed I do," the little director said, taking off his large horn-rimmed spectacles and inspecting Jeff critically. "You look tired. Don't overdo it the first day." He replaced the spectacles. "Yes, I met Mr. Gardiner very much. Eunice Sutton introduced me as her best friend—a director is always a girl's best friend, you know—and Gardiner was so happy to meet her best friend that for a few minutes I was afraid he was going to give me Wall Street, as if I didn't have enough troubles of my own." Rosswell hiccupped delicately and snatched a goblet from a passing tray. "Mr. Gardiner surprised me. I didn't know these captains of finance were such frolicsome fellows. There he is now, doing the bumps—burlesque should snap him up in case he ever runs out of bullion."

"What?" Jeff exclaimed, looking around. "Gardiner doing the bumps?"

Indeed, such was the case. The head of the conga line, led by Eunice Sutton, came into view through one of the French windows leading onto the terrace and directly behind her was Phineas T., his jowels flopping up and down as he bumped and wiggled along behind Eunice, doing his best to imitate her; a matter which would require a good deal of anatomical activity by even an experienced conga artist.

"Looks a bit like Colonel Blimp on a bender, doesn't he?" Rosswell asked, leaning against the wall and looking like a small dejected bird in horn-rimmed glasses. "Possibly I ought to switch over to brandy. Scotch doesn't seem to generate enough energy in me for participation in such athletic events."

"Cash!" Eunice screamed. She deserted the conga line to its fate and rushed toward him. "Where have you been? I've got a bone to pick with you. Are you having a good time? Where's Barbara? Didn't anybody give you a drink?"

"Thanks," Jeff said, settling for the last question. "I don't care for a drink."

"Oh!" Eunice stared at him. "Well, isn't there anything you want. You don't smoke. You must be a model young man and I'm not familiar with what to do to make a model young man happy."

"You can scratch my back," Jeff suggested. "The adhesive tape itches."

"Turn around," said Eunice, as if scratching her guests' backs was a daily occurrence. "Benny, you run along, darling—I want to talk with Cash. You don't mind, do you pet?"

"No, I don't mind," Rosswell replied, shoving off from the wall. "Here comes your wolf from Wall Street, anyway, and I don't think I ought to be here. My cigar might ignite his breath. I was afraid it was going to the last time he breathed on me."

"Cash," Eunice whispered quickly, "did you mean it when you told Jimmy to tell me you'd see my option was renewed with a big increase if I saw to it that Phineas Gardiner stayed out here for a while?"

"*If* my combination takes over the management of Continental," Jeff replied, looking warily over his shoulder. "I said a substantial increase."

"Oh!" Eunice stopped scratching his back. "How much is substantial?"

"Oh, possibly five hundred dollars a week," Jeff replied casually. "But no dice if Phineas loses interest in Hollywood and goes home."

Eunice resumed scratching with renewed vigor. "Don't worry, baby, he won't lose interest. But I wish you'd take him off my trail for a while. I want to have one dance with that muscle man of yours."

"Where *is* Jimmy?"

"Out on the terrace, having too much fun, I'm afraid," she replied, turning around to greet Phineas Gardiner with a delighted cooing noise.

Phineas beamed.

"Eunice, would you excuse us a moment?" Jeff said. "There's something very important I have to discuss with Mr. Gardiner."

Phineas fixed Jeff with a baleful glare. "There's nothing so important you can't discuss it with me tomorrow morning." He turned back to Eunice and grabbed her hand. "Come on, you were going to teach me how to rumba."

"In a few minutes, darling," she said, patting his cheek. "I've been with you every minute, pet, and I've just got to see that everything's going all right. After all, I am the hostess. I'll be right back, lamb."

Phineas Gardiner's associates and his hundreds of enemies would have been astonished to have heard him referred to as a lamb, but Phineas seemed to enjoy it.

"Wonderful girl," said the lamb. "What the hell do you want?"

"Jordan wants me to represent his interest in Continental. He'd prefer to have me do it exclusively for him, but I have a plan whereby I think I can convince him that you should be dealt in."

Phineas, still panting from his recent exertions, concentrated his attention on Jeff, a suspicious expression making its appearance on his face.

"You wouldn't be playing both ends against the middle, would you?" he asked.

Jeff silently sighed. No matter how much brandy Phineas drank, he always knew what he was doing. "Of course not. However, if you want to be in the picture business, here's your chance. We'd have complete control if this idea of mine pans out."

Phineas started to say something and then frowned, looking toward the terrace where Eunice Sutton was dancing with Jimmy Ranger. Jeff followed his glance and grinned. Their dancing was somewhat unusual. The music wasn't playing.

"What company is Miss Sutton under contract to?" Phineas demanded.

"Continental," Jeff replied.

"Come out here where there isn't so much racket," Gardiner said. "It might be interesting to have an interest in this business."

A half-hour later, Jeff located his hostess and Jimmy Ranger in the garden. "Let me talk to the glamour boy for a few minutes, will you?" he asked Eunice.

"Why don't you blow your horn when you come around a curve?" she demanded, swishing off.

"Phineas is on the terrace," Jeff called after her, remindfully adding to Jimmy: "Wipe the lipstick off your mouth, Casanova."

"How did *you* make out?" Jimmy inquired.

"I did all right, too," Jeff grinned. "I reversed the story, quite truthfully, of course, telling him about the management-company idea and saying that if he would go for it, I thought I could convince Rufus Jordan to go in on it. Jordan said, of course, that I'd have to prove to him that Lozing was a crook, but he already is half convinced. He can smell larceny a mile away."

Jimmy scratched his blond thatch when Jeff told him about both interviews. "That may not be so simple—

at least, as far as Jordan is concerned. You'll have to make your accusation against Lozing stick as tight as a court plaster to put it over. And Lozing's no fool; worried or not, that baby has a sleeveful of slick tricks. He's just liable to make suckers out of us."

"Not now," Jeff said. "Not a chance." He told Jimmy about Pat Hagan.

Jimmy whistled. "Wow!" he exclaimed, snapping his fingers exultantly. "That does it! What a break!"

Jeff nodded. "That's it, all right. He's been digging at it for two years." He arose. "Well, my back's killing me and I'm dead tired. Let's go home."

"I should go home because you're dead tired," Jimmy said. "Nuts."

"You're coming home with me," Jeff said. "I don't want Phineas Gardiner wandering out in the garden and tripping over you and your blonde powder keg. Come on, Romeo—romance will have to wait for the wheels of industry to begin turning."

Reluctantly, Jimmy sought out his hostess and bid her good night.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," Jeff grinned. "Where's Barbara, anyway?"

"Well, I'm glad you know I'm alive," she said from behind him. "Where have you been?"

Jeff winked. "I've been busy paving the way for your stardom, darling. You can't get mad at a boy for that, can you?"

"Cash!" she exclaimed, squealing exultantly. "You did it?"

"Well, there are a few minor details to be cleaned up, but things look pretty good."

Barbara threw her arms around him, much to the interest of a large number of people nearby. "That's wonderful," she exclaimed.

"Please—remember your reputation," he said. He grinned. "Not that I don't like it—but not in public. People might think I was after your money."

"Humph!" she pouted. "You're after Uncle Rufus' money—same difference."

"Just a gigolo," Jeff said. "How's for driving a poor cripple home?"

"O. K. Wait until I get my wrap." She steered them out to the piazza. "Shorter this way."

At the piazza end, Jeff saw a bulky form seated on the flagstone steps. Coming abreast, he saw in the dim light that it was Pat Hagan, a lighted cigarette drooping from his lips, his shoulder settled comfortably against one of the pillars.

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ter I ever saw," Jeff commented.

Hagan didn't reply. He didn't even move.

Jeff stopped, puzzled. "Hello, Pat," he said, raising his voice. There was no answer.

Barbara laughed. "He must be drunk. Take the cigarette out of his mouth before he burns his lips."

Jimmy Ranger leaned down and took the cigarette from Pat's lips.

"Maybe we'd better take him inside and stretch him out some place," he said.

"Get out of the way," Jeff said, pushing Jimmy aside. He reached down and shook Hagan's shoulder. "Pat."

Limply, Hagan rolled away from the pillar. Dropping swiftly to his knee, Jeff caught the writer and eased him to the floor. "Jimmy, light a match," he said sharply.

"What's the matter?" Barbara asked fearfully.

Jeff ignored her, feeling for Hagan's pulse. The match scratched into life and Jimmy thrust it toward Hagan's face. The writer's eyes were wide open, fixed in a glassy stare, his face contorted into an expression of horrible agony.

"My God!" Jimmy exclaimed. "He's dead!"

"Light another match," Jeff commanded, his voice harsh. "Barbara! Don't scream."

"I . . . I won't," she sobbed. "Oh, his face! Poor Pat!"

Jeff took the match from Jimmy's hand and swiftly inspected the body. Finally he returned the match to Pat's tie. It was disarranged, torn away from his throat.

"He must have had a heart attack," Jimmy said.

Jeff lit a third match and held it over the tie—examining three specks of white powder. Wetting his finger, he touched one of the white specks and then put his finger to his tongue.

"No, he didn't suffer a heart attack," Jeff said slowly, getting up. "He was murdered!"

CHAPTER XV.

MISSING MANUSCRIPT.

JIMMY RANGER jumped quickly to Barbara Jordan's side, seizing her by the back of the head with one hand and preparing to clamp his hand over her mouth with the other.

"Let her scream," Jeff snapped. Jimmy stayed his hand, looking toward Jeff in surprise, and Barbara did scream. It was a shrill, piercing shriek. There was stark horror in it as it mounted to a wavering, hysterical note. Stillness settled over the entire house and grounds as Barbara's cry pierced the night. There followed a quick clamor of voices and the pounding of feet.

Jeff jumped to Barbara's side and slapped her face sharply. "Don't get hysterical," he said, then he slipped his arm around her. "Listen, did you know Pat was Rex Jones' cousin?"

She nodded mutely, staring at the body on the steps. "Yes, of course."

"Did you know he was trying to prove Rex was murdered?" he asked.

"No," she said. "He . . . he asked me a lot of questions about Rex's death when he first came out, and once he asked me not to tell anyone he was Rex's cousin. He said there was a reason, and that he would tell me some day."

"There was a reason, all right," Jeff said grimly. A door at the end of the piazza burst open, lights flared up all over the west side of the grounds, illuminating the colonnade walk.

"Did you hear that scream?" a man shouted to them from the door. Taking in the tableau, he said: "Oh, what's wrong?"

Jeff answered: "We found Pat Hagan out here. He's dead. Send for a doctor, will you? There's no pulse, but you can't tell—"

"Right-o," the man shouted, pushing his way back through the crowd of people spilling out of the house.

"Not a word about murder," Jeff said. He shook Barbara's shoulder. "Hear me, darling?"

"Yes, I heard you," she said. "Oh, Cash, this is horrible." Suddenly she realized what he had told her. "What do you mean?"

"Please," he said. "Do as I tell you. We found him here. Tell just how we found him. But don't say anything about murder."

People crowded around them, staring at Pat in fascinated horror. Questions were hurled at Barbara, Jeff and Jimmy. Furtively, Jeff consulted his wrist watch, and then, as soon as he felt it was safe to do so, caught Jimmy's eye and jerked his head toward the driveway. Catching Barbara's arm, he drew her aside.

"I'm leaving. If anybody asks, explain that it was my first day on my feet since the accident, and the shock, together with being tired, was too much for me," Jeff said.

"But, Cash, won't it look funny?" she asked.

"Do what I tell you," he snapped, pushing her back toward the crowd, where Eunice Sutton, with her customary level-headedness in moments of excitement, was restoring a semblance of order. "Help Eunice get people away from here."

Jimmy had Barbara's car in the driveway nearest the walk leading to the piazza. Its motor was running when Jeff got there, the card Pat Hagan had given him earlier in the evening in his hand. He consulted it by the dash light, reading the address aloud. "Know where it is?" he asked Jimmy.

"Yeah," Ranger replied, tooling the machine to the highway. In the street he swung right.

"Step on it," Jeff said. "We've lost ten minutes. How far is this place?"

"Up the canyon road about ten miles from here," Jimmy replied. "I was out there with him the other day."

"Does he live alone?"

"He has a Chinese man of all work. It's a small cottage, Spanish-type bungalow. What's up?" Jimmy braked a halt for a red light.

"The hell with the lights!" Jeff snapped. "I'll watch for traffic from this side and you watch the other. We have a long chance to get to Hagan's house first."

The speedometer hit sixty-five. "Who else is trying to get there?"

"The murderer," Jeff said grimly. "Hagan thought he heard somebody in the garden. Footsteps—when we were talking. He was right. Somebody overheard us. That's why Hagan's dead. He was silenced forever, but to make it stick, they have to have his manuscript."

They were in the canyon road now and the roar of the motor was tossed back at them from the walls. The road was deserted, and the speedometer needle crept to eighty.

"My God, but this is fantastic," Jimmy said. "These people operate like gangsters. Are you sure it was murder?"

"Absolutely," Jeff said. "That white stuff on his tie was powdered trioxide of arsenic. Somebody grabbed him from behind—probably jumped him and put a body scissors on him before he knew what was up. Then the murderer jerked Hagan's head back on his chest with one hand over Hagan's mouth and plastered the other over his nose. The arsenic was in that hand, and Hagan breathed it up his nose while he was struggling to get loose. Paralyzed his brain. Makes it look like heart failure."

Jimmy swore. "They even put the cigarette back in his mouth. Say, they can't be very far ahead of us!" He switched on a spotlight and began raking the houses along the roadside with it.

"Do you have to do that?" Jeff demanded.

"I can't see in the dark, and I've only been out here once," Jimmy said. "We'll have to take a chance." The car slowed down. He picked up a number on a gatepost. "It's two houses up."

"Switch off your lights!" Jeff commanded. They crept softly up to the house. It was in absolute darkness, the moon shining fitfully on it through breaks in the clouds. "No car—"

"There's one parked across the road —about a hundred yards in back of us," Jimmy said.

"Never mind," Jeff replied. He fumbled in the dashboard compartment. "Here's a flashlight."

They mounted the steps cautiously, and Jimmy, grasping Jeff's wrist, took the flashlight from him and pushed ahead, muttering, "I'm in better shape than you are." He fumbled for the handle of the front door. Jeff heard the latch click as Jimmy found it and pressed down. They paused and listened. There was no sound from within. Jimmy tried the door. It creaked beneath the pressure he put on it and then slid back. "Open," he muttered. "Watch it."

Giving the door a shove with his foot, he simultaneously turned on the beam of his torch. A man sprang sidewise through the door, swinging his arm; a huge man with a handkerchief over the lower part of his face. Jimmy drew back the torch and smashed at the man with it. There was a grunt, followed by a sickening thud, and the torch went out, clattering hollowly to the floor. Jeff threw himself toward the two swaying figures, yelling, "Hold him, Jimmy!"

A limp body was thrust against him, and simultaneously he was struck a dazing blow from behind. He fell to his knees, shaking his head to clear it, and a heavy foot caught him alongside the head. He collapsed to the floor. Still conscious, he remained motionless.

"They're both out," a harsh voice said. "Grab the stuff and let's get out of here."

Jeff made no attempt to intercept them. Still groggy, and with his back in the shape it was, he could accomplish nothing by heroics. A flashing beam stabbed the darkness and he closed his eyes.

"It's Gorman," a second voice said. "Let's give it to him now."

"Don't be a sap," the first man growled. The voices were muffled by the handkerchiefs the men wore over their faces. "You can carry coincidence too far."

"He'll blab," the second man protested.

"He's after something; he won't sing. Come on—let's lam."

They grunted, and the clink of metal came to Jeff. Then their footsteps went off. Cautiously he opened his eyes, but the moonlight was hazed over and the street was dark. He could make out only two indistinct figures.

"Jimmy," he said softly. There was no answer.

Jeff fumbled in his pocket and, when he thought it was safe, scratched a match. The sound of an engine starting came from down the street. Groping over the floor, he located the flashlight Jimmy had dropped and turned it on. Ranger, a long dark welt over his temple puffing up blue and dangerous-looking, lay still. He felt for Jimmy's pulse and found it beating weakly and slowly, but steadily. Entering the house, he located the kitchen and got some water, with which he rubbed Jimmy's face. Ranger opened his eyes. Jeff gave him a drink.

"Isn't there anything but war around?" Ranger grumped. He put his hand to his head and exclaimed, "Ouch! He must have hit me with a blackjack. How are you?"

"Not bad," Jeff said. He helped Jimmy to his feet. Ranger wabbled a little, but made the door and then collapsed in a chair.

"The liqour's in a cabinet in here. Better turn on the lights—it'll look less suspicious than that flashlight of yours."

"Right you are," Jeff said. He turned up the lights and located the liquor, passing Jimmy the bottle. "Take a good one."

"Whee!" Jimmy breathed after helping himself liberally.

Jeff took the bottle and wiped it off with his handkerchief.

"What's the idea?" Jimmy inquired as Jeff did the same to the door latch and the light switch.

"Look at this place," Jeff said. Jimmy looked around. It was a wreck. "They turned it inside out," Jeff continued. "Slick," he said, coming back. "They stole silver, and everything else of any possible value. Made it look like a robbery." He repeated the conversation he had heard between the two men.

"Do we look for the manuscript?" Jimmy asked.

"They probably have it, but we might as well look. You take the upstairs and I'll do his study. Where is it?"

Jimmy pointed to a door to the left. The room had been ransacked.

After fifteen minutes, Jeff said, "We'd better leave. There's a wall safe in there—he probably had it in that with his research data. It was broken open with tongs from the fireplace."

Back at their hotel, Jeff called Eunice Sutton's house and got hold of Barbara. "What did the doctor say?" Jeff asked.

"Heart failure," she replied.

"O. K. Don't mention murder," Jeff said. He sank back into an easy-chair and brooded for a few minutes. "We underestimated him," he said at last. "I can't understand how there can be so many people in this without there being a leak."

"Didn't what you heard tonight when you were playing possum on the porch strike you as odd?" Jimmy asked, doctoring his head.

"What do you mean?"

"The way you tell it," Jimmy said, feeling his way carefully, "their words were a little mixed up. One fellow says: 'You can carry coincidence too far,' and the next minute he says: 'Let's lam out of here.'"

Jeff's eyes brightened with interest. "I catch," he said. He snapped his fingers. "A gangster who had gotten himself an education might drop back and forth between culture and the old habits under stress. Is that what you mean?"

Jimmy nodded. "Sounds insane, doesn't it?"

Jeff laughed. "Well, there's something odd about the whole situation, you'll have to admit." He sobered. "I feel like hell about Hagan. If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be dead."

"Snap out of it," Jimmy reassured him. "You're no crystal gazer. Well, what now?"

Jeff considered. "Get out to Sutton's place the first thing in the morning. Find out who has charge of the funeral arrangements. Probably one of his pals—maybe Benny Rosswell. Pat's folks lived in the East, and they may want the body sent there, but whatever it is, try to see that his burial is delayed. We won't want to ask for an autopsy now, but—"

"I get you," Jimmy said. "Do you think we can rely on Barbara to keep her beautiful mouth shut?"

"Sometimes I don't think she's half as dumb as she appears to be," Jeff commented. "Say, did you clunk one of those fellows with that flashlight?"

Jimmy nodded sourly. "I just hit him a glancing crack—worse luck."

"Where's the flash?"

Jimmy produced it, and Jeff examined it carefully, then wrapped it in a clean handkerchief. "There's blood on the end of it."

"Maybe it's mine," Jimmy suggested.

"Always the optimist."

Fagged out, he was still sleeping in the morning when Rufus Jordan called him.

"Mr. Lozing called on me last night shortly after you left," Jordan said. "He told me approximately what you predicted he would. Lozing sounded somewhat cold. I adopted the attitude you suggested, Mr. Gorman, and Lozing told me he could definitely prove you were unworthy of trust—an embezzler, in fact. I don't have too much time to waste here, so I shall expect you to proceed rapidly if you wish to convince me."

Jeff hung up the receiver. "I think we can expect some action tomorrow from friend David," he said. "The sheriff will probably be around tomorrow with a warrant for me on a charge of embezzlement."

Monday morning, Jimmy poked his head in the door to Jeff's bedroom as Jeff shaved.

"You were wrong about the sheriff. One of his deputies came instead."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

JEFF'S appearance in court was greeted with a score of stabbing flashes of light from photographic bulbs. Barbara furnished a new drama for the photographers by brushing past court attendants and rushing up to Jeff.

"Cash, what's it all about?" she asked excitedly. "Is there anything I can do?"

Jeff winked. "Keep your chin up," he said, adding forcefully: "And don't say *anything* to the reporters."

A court attendant seized her arm and pulled her away, protesting angrily. Judge McClennan rapped sternly for order as the scrambling photographers, jostled each other for pictures of Barbara. The courtroom was filled with motion-picture people and sensation seekers.

The arraignment proceeded swiftly,

an assistant prosecutor by the name of Chester Meggs presenting the charge: "Attempted embezzlement of Continental Pictures, Incorporated."

Jeff entered a plea of "Not guilty," and Bill Ramsey, Jeff's hastily procured lawyer, addressed the bench: "The defendant waives the right to trial by jury, your honor. An immediate hearing of the case would be appreciated."

Judge McClennan blinked, took off his spectacles and inspected Jeff curiously. Finally he turned to Chester Meggs. "Do you have any objections?" he asked the assistant prosecutor.

Meggs, too, looked startled, but he shook his head. "None whatever, your honor."

Bail was set at ten thousand dollars, which Jeff produced from his pocket, tendering the court clerk ten one-thousand-dollar bills.

The hearing was set for the next day, and the courtroom was crowded once again, with Barbara Jordan furnishing the dramatic touch by entering with her arm linked in Jeff's.

"You're a soldier," he whispered as the flash bulbs sprayed light over them.

"I thought you said I was a nitwit," she replied.

"Nobody but a soldier or a nitwit would climb out on a limb this way," he answered.

"Then you must be one, too," she said. "Anyway, I'm just doing it for the publicity for my next picture. Possibly you'd better put a good court scene in it so we can really cash in on this."

"The gal *does* have ideas," Jeff remarked to Jimmy Ranger. "A court scene we must have in the epic."

"And I suppose you'll direct it by remote control from San Quentin," Jimmy remarked dryly. "There's your pal, Lozing."

Jeff's eyes sought Lozing's, and the little man looked away. Jeff, however, continued to look at the producer as he and Ramsey took their seats, and when Lozing looked toward him again, Jeff smiled broadly and bowed.

"Little man, what now?" Jeff called.

Lozing's mouth tightened into a straight, mean line, and his face flushed fire-red when several spectators near enough to overhear the remark laughed.

He was the first witness, and he took the stand with a malicious smile of triumph in Jeff's direction. The customary ritual of identification completed, Chester Meggs, the youthful prosecutor, asked: "Mr. Lozing, did the defendant, Thomas Jefferson Gorman, call at your

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office on Tuesday of last week?"

"He did," Lozing said, his shoe-button eyes glittering with anticipation of the coming questions.

"What, precisely, was the purpose of his visit?"

Lozing's face assumed its familiar fatherly and benign expression. "This is very painful to me," he said. "Were it not that the interests of the company must be protected, and did I not feel that the true character of this man is unknown to persons for whom he possibly is acting as agent, I would not have brought this charge—"

Lozing paused to let this sink in, looking appropriately pained, and the judge and reporters covering the case turned expectant eyes on Jeff's attorney, but Ramsey entered no objection.

"Continue, Mr. Lozing," Judge McClennan said dryly.

"Mr. Gorman told me he was representing financial interests in the East which were planning to obtain control of Continental Pictures. As their representative, he said that he had it within his power to either extend or terminate my contract with Continental upon its expiration two years hence, and that, meanwhile, he would be able to so curtail my activities in the company that I would have virtually nothing to say. He even intimated that a way might be found to void my contract before its expiration. He then offered to see to it that my contract would be renewed at an increase in salary and bonuses if I paid him a hundred thousand dollars—fifty thousand dollars in cash and the remainder next year."

A startled hum ran through the courtroom, and Judge McClennan rapped for order. Jeff shot a quick look at Rufus Jordan, who was seated stony-faced among the spectators, and stuck his tongue in his cheek. Rufus undoubtedly had been told this story, but he hadn't relayed it to Jeff. Jordan was playing his cards close to his vest, apparently equally suspicious of both him and Lozing. Ramsey sprang to his feet.

"I object, your honor," he shouted over the din. "The charge against my client is attempted embezzlement of funds of Continental Pictures, and—"

Jeff grabbed Ramsey's arm. "Let it go," he said. Ramsey protested, but Jeff persisted. "I want to see what they're up to—"

"I withdraw the objection," Ramsey said.

Lozing looked toward Jeff suspiciously.

Chester Meggs put another question: "What did you do, Mr. Lozing?"

"I ordered Gorman out of my office," Lozing said.

"Did he threaten you?"

Ramsey started to his feet automatically.

"Sit down!" Jeff snapped.

Lozing's benign face took on an expression of indignation as he answered the question. "He told me he would give me a week to take his proposition or leave it."

"What did you do?" Meggs asked.

"I consulted first with Mr. Jordan, whose representative I believed Mr. Gorman to be, from what he said to me," Lozing said. "Mr. Jordan told me he had implicit confidence in Mr. Gorman, but that Gorman was not authorized to represent him officially in any capacity."

"I see," Meggs smiled. "Did you inform Mr. Jordan of Gorman's threats?"

"I did," Lozing said. "That is the reason why I felt compelled to make this charge."

"Will you explain that statement,

please, Mr. Lozing?" the prosecutor asked.

"Mr. Jordan told me that Gorman informed him that Mr. Leffingwell, attorney for Continental Pictures, had made a settlement with him, as my representative, for fifty thousand dollars for a minor accident Gorman suffered while visiting the studio."

Meggs asked for additional information regarding the accident, which Lozing explained.

"I see," the prosecutor said. "What do you think the defendant's objective was in making this accusation?"

"He was trying to discredit me with Mr. Jordan, one of our largest stockholders," Lozing said. "This publicity was very objectionable, but I felt it my duty to make this charge, due to the fact that Mr. Jordan was loath to believe that Mr. Gorman could be guilty of such conduct."

"Did you make any private attempt to investigate the statement made by the defendant that he had been paid fifty thousand dollars in settlement of this accident?"

"Yes, I did," Lozing said. "I summoned Mr. Leffingwell."

"Is he the attorney for Continental Pictures?"

"Yes, but he is not a company attorney in the sense that he is employed directly by the company on a salary. His firm is employed by Continental Pictures and functions as our legal department. However, it also has other clients."

"What did Mr. Leffingwell tell you?"

"He denied that he had made any settlement with Mr. Gorman," Lozing said, adding with a darting, triumphant glance at Jeff: "However, when I told him Gorman had stated he could prove he had a check on our legal firm, Mr. Leffingwell admitted that he had given Mr. Gorman a check for fifty thousand dollars, but refused to tell me any more about the matter, stating that it would violate the confidence of a client."

The prosecutor then brought out, by a series of questions, the fact that Leffingwell's firm could not, without special authorization, make settlements of any nature with checks drawn on its own firm, and that such authorization had to bear the signature of the Continental president, Reagan.

"Your witness," Meggs said, turning to Ramsey with a smile.

"No questions," Ramsey said.

There was a shocked silence in the courtroom. Even Judge McClennan was startled. Lozing darted an uneasy glance toward Jeff, who smiled at him complacently as Continental's executive left the witness stand.

Leffingwell was called to the stand. He protested that he was appearing only because a subpoena had been served upon him.

"Mr. Leffingwell, did you or did you not make payment of fifty thousand dollars to the defendant by check drawn on your firm?" Meggs asked.

"I did," Leffingwell said.

"Was this payment in settlement of a claim against Continental Pictures?"

"It was not," Leffingwell declared, with seeming reluctance.

"What was the payment for, Mr. Leffingwell?"

The attorney turned toward the bench. "Your honor, I protest against Mr. Megg's question. To answer it would violate the confidence of a client."

Judge Clennan looked questioningly toward Jeff's attorney, but Ramsey made no objection. Meggs pleaded that in view of the testimony, the answer was essential to obtaining a full revelation of the facts.

"I will examine the witness privately and determine whether or not the testimony is relevant," Judge McClennan answered, ordering a half-hour recess.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Ramsey told Jeff fervently. "I'm going to look like an awful dope if you've slipped on this."

Jeff nodded dryly. "I wish that was all I had to worry about. I'm going to jail if I'm wrong."

When Leffingwell resumed the stand, Jeff watched Lozing, noting a sly smile of satisfaction curl about the producer's lips.

"It is the opinion of the court that Mr. Leffingwell's testimony is relevent to the case," Judge McClennan pronounced. "Mr. Meggs, you may restate your question."

"For what was the fifty-thousand-dollar payment made to the defendant?" Meggs asked. A tense silence settled over the courtroom.

"The money was paid to Mr. Gorman on behalf of a client of our firm on Mr. Gorman's promise to continue the purchase of certain supplies from this client's firm when the interests he represented took over control of Continental Pictures," Leffingwell stated.

"Who was this client?" Meggs asked.

"Mr. LeRoy Moss," Leffingwell replied.

"The electrical-supply contractor?" Meggs asked.

"Yes."

There was an outburst of excited talk among the spectators. When order had been restored, Meggs turned to Ramsey with a broad smile. "Your witness."

"No questions," Ramsey said.

Again there was a startled silence in the court. Watching Lozing, Jeff saw him stir uneasily. Meggs, a puzzled frown on his face, turned back to the bench and requested a recess until Moss could be subpoenaed.

"I'm here," a voice called. A heavy-set, dark-faced man rose in the middle of the room and pushed toward the aisle, adding: "You don't need a subpoena. I'll be glad to testify against that smooth-talking crook. He told me his outfit already had control of Continental, and I believed him."

Judge McClennan's gavel rapped sharply. "Please keep your opinions to yourself until you are placed on the witness stand, Mr. Moss."

Moss substantiated Leffingwell's testimony, with Meggs, by skillful questioning, bringing out the fact that Moss enjoyed practically a monopoly in the sale of electrical equipment and the construction of special electrical appliances for Continental Pictures.

"When did you reach this . . . ah . . . agreement with Mr. Gorman?" the prosecutor asked.

"On Monday of last week," Moss declared. "I would never have paid him a nickel if I'd known he wasn't even officially representing these Eastern people. He told me the deal was all set, and I heard from other sources it was, too. People that oughta know."

"Did you sign any papers with Mr. Gorman?" the prosecutor asked.

"Certainly not," Moss replied. "He wouldn't even take my company's check. Insisted that he be paid through my attorney. That's how Leffingwell came into it."

"Thank you, Mr. Moss," the prosecutor said. He turned again to Ramsey.

"No questions," Jeff's attorney said.

Meggs called to the stand a prematurely old-looking man, running to puffy fat, with the weak, sagging features of a chronic alcoholic. It was apparent from the whispers in the courtroom that the spectators recognized him.

"Your name is Jack Rockford?" Meggs asked.

Jeff started and exchanged a puzzled glance with his lawyer. When vaudeville had been in its heyday, Jack Rockford had been famous from coast to coast, particularly for his impersonations. Ramsey frowned.

"They're certainly throwing the book at you," he said. "This has me worried."

Meggs cleared his throat and moved closer to Rockford so that he would appear in the pictures the photographers were shooting. "Your profession, Mr. Rockford?"

"I'm an actor."

There was a titter among some of the spectators. Rockford had not appeared on stage or screen for at least five years.

"What is your specialty, Mr. Rockford?"

"I'm an impersonator," Rockford said. Meggs asked him to explain what he meant, and Rockford did.

"In other words, your impersonations not only include mimicry of the physical eccentricities of the subjects, but of their voices."

"That's right," Rockford said. "I can imitate anybody's voice. Nobody in the world even approaches me."

Meggs smiled slightly. "Do you know the defendant, Thomas Jefferson Gorman?"

"I do," Rockford replied.

"Have you had any business transactions with Mr. Gorman?"

Rockford looked toward the floor shamefacedly. "I have."

"We'll leave that for a moment," Mr. Meggs said. "With the court's permission, I would like to ask Mr. Rockford to demonstrate his talent."

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Judge McClennan gazed questioningly toward Ramsey, who started to rise to enter an objection, but Jeff tugged at his sleeve and shook his head.

"Go ahead," the judge said.

"Give us an imitation of Mr. Leffingwell's voice," Meggs asked.

With evident relish at the presence of so attentive an audience, Rockford opened his mouth and a perfect imitation of Leffingwell's soft, smooth voice rolled forth.

"And now Mr. Lozing, if you please."

Incongruously, Lozing's high voice piped from Rockford. There was scattered applause among the spectators, and Judge McClennan sternly brought the room to order.

"Thank you, Mr. Rockford," Meggs said. "Now, what was the nature of your business with Mr. Gorman?"

Rockford drooped dispiritedly. "Well, things haven't been very good with me lately," he said, going into an involved explanation of the various ill fates which had beset him, making no mention, however, of liquor.

"We understand, Mr. Rockford," Meggs said sympathetically. "However, will you please answer my question?"

Rockford hesitated. "Well, I needed the money, and Mr. Gorman offered me fifteen hundred dollars to make a dictaphone record of a conversation which he was supposed to have with Mr. Leffingwell. I imitated Leffingwell."

Jeff shot a startled glance at Rufus Jordan, who was leaning forward in his seat listening intently to the witness. When he found Jeff's eyes on him he frowned with displeasure, and then, catching the meaning of Jeff's hard glance, he shook his head.

"Jordan didn't tell him," Jeff muttered. "And he's plenty suspicious of me now. These boys are fast on their feet."

"There goes our dictaphone record," Ramsey muttered. "You might as well toss it out the window."

Jeff nodded uneasily.

"What was the nature of this conversation, Mr. Rockford?" Mr. Meggs pursued.

"Well, Gorman, he spoke for himself and I imitated Leffingwell. He had a script all worked out," Rockford answered. "Leffingwell was supposed to be representing Continental Pictures and making a settlement with Gorman for an accident that happened at Continental Pictures."

Meggs drew out the details of the alleged fraud which made a remarkably accurate report of the actual conversation, although Rockford protested that his memory wasn't as good as it used to be about details, raising a titter from the spectators.

"Your witness," Meggs said, finally addressing Ramsey.

Jeff spoke briefly to Ramsey.

"Mr. Rockford," Ramsey said. "Under what circumstances did you come to furnish the prosecutor with this alleged information?"

"Objection," Meggs shouted.

Judge McClennan turned a grave face to Ramsey. "What is the purpose of this line of questioning, Mr. Ramsey?"

"We feel that the manner in which Mr. Rockford was brought into this case is pertinent in view of the fact that it is intended to forestall a valuable piece of evidence for the defense—notably a dictaphone record of a conversation between Mr. Leffingwell and Mr. Gorman," Ramsey answered.

Judge McClennan hesitated. "Objection overruled."

Ramsey restated the question.

"Well, when Gorman paid me I had a few drinks. You know, I hadn't been working for a long time, and I guess I got talking to some fellow in a tavern and he went and told Mr. David Lozing," Rockford replied. He jerked his head toward Meggs. "Anyway, that's what he said."

"Who was this person to whom you were supposed to have talked?" Ramsey asked.

"Objection," Meggs said.

"Overruled," Judge McClennan answered. "Answer the question, witness."

"I don't remember talking to anybody," Rockford said. "Meggs said I talked to Dick Port."

"Who is Dick Port?" Ramsey pressed.

"He's the assistant purchasing agent out at Continental," Rockford replied. He seemed uneasy.

"That's all," Ramsey said.

"The prosecution rests," Meggs announced.

"The defense does not wish to call any witnesses," Ramsey said unexpectedly. He opened his brief case. "However, we wish to enter the following exhibits on which we rest our case. The first is this dictaphone record of the conversation between Mr. Leffingwell and Mr. Gorman on Tuesday night—the night of the accident." He paused and then held forth a set of papers. "Also this copy of an agreement between Mr. Gorman, as claimant, and Continental Pictures, as represented by Mr. Leffingwell, as is duly set forth in the agreement, in which Mr. Gorman waived all rights to further claims against Continental Pictures with regard to the accident which befell him in return for the sum of fifty thousand dollars."

Jeff, his eyes on Lozing, saw the producer start and turn pale. Leffingwell wet his lips and looked at Lozing with a bewildered air, then sprang to his feet. "That's a forgery," he shouted. "I signed nothing. Let me see that paper."

The judge rapped for order. "Sit down, Mr. Leffingwell. Any further remarks of that nature and I will be forced to hold you in contempt of court. Continue, Mr. Ramsey."

"This copy of the agreement is duly signed by Mr. Gorman and Mr. Leffingwell, and was duly notarized. We are willing to submit it to the decision of any recognized authority on handwriting, such as the expert of the Los Angeles police department, which the court might care to consult to establish the veracity of the signatures. In view of this evidence, we ask that the case be dismissed."

Judge McClennan, his face grim, called a recess and retired to his chamber to read the document submitted to him and hear the dictaphone record.

"The boys seemed to be a little perturbed," Jeff remarked to Ramsey. Lozing and Leffingwell had drawn aside and were arguing violently. Finally they summoned Moss, the electrical contractor, who seemed badly shaken, to join them.

Judge McClennan finally reappeared, consulted with Meggs, and called a postponement of further proceedings until the following day, when he summoned the handwriting expert of the police department to the stand.

"Have you compared the signatures of Mr. Leffingwell on this check and that on this legal document offered as evidence by the defendant?" the judge asked.

"Yes, sir," the officer replied.

"What was your finding?"

"The handwriting is that of the same person, your honor."

"Thank you, officer, that will be all," the judge said. "Mr. Leffingwell, please take the stand."

Despite a fierce interrogation from the bench, Leffingwell maintained his story. The judge next questioned Lozing, who maintained his ignorance of the settlement.

Jeff was then questioned.

"Did you or did you not have a conference with Mr. David Lozing at his office on Wednesday of last week at the time mentioned by Mr. Lozing?"

"I did," Jeff replied, looking toward Lozing, who was deathly white.

"Did you threaten Mr. Lozing with the loss of his position unless he paid you a hundred thousand dollars?" Judge McClennan asked.

"I did not," Jeff said.

"What did you talk about?"

"The furniture in Mr. Lozing's office."

There was a titter from the spectators.

"What?" the judge demanded. "Explain yourself."

Jeff did. When he mentioned his questioning the bust of Napoleon, the courtroom was swept with a gale of laughter. Dazid Lozing squirmed in his seat, his gimlet eyes glowing with hate, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Is it your custom to insult people when calling upon them, Mr. Gorman?" the judge asked acidly.

"No, your honor, but I had received a check in settlement of damages from Continental Pictures, and Mr. Lozing denied knowledge of it," Jeff replied easily. "Naturally, I felt that I had become the victim either of a misunderstanding or a deliberate attempt to involve me in a plot of some nature. I have found that an angry man will frequently say things which he wouldn't otherwise."

"Did Mr. Lozing say anything that would lead you to believe that he had knowledge of the transaction between yourself and Mr. Leffingwell?"

Jeff evaded the question. "He ended our private interview by calling me a swindler and demanding to know what was my purpose in alleging that Continental had made a settlement with me. I affirmed my stand. He sent for Mr. Leffingwell, who told him he had paid me a fifty-thousand-dollar check, but refused to tell him for what, stating that he would violate the confidence of a client."

The judge frowned. "Did you accuse Mr. Leffingwell of dishonesty before Mr. Lozing?"

"I complimented him on his masterly histrionic abilities," Jeff replied, smiling.

"Didn't Mr. Lozing demand to see the papers now in my possession?" the judge asked.

"He did," Jeff replied.

"Then why didn't you show them to him?"

"Circumstances arose which led me to believe that, whatever Mr. Lozing's position in the matter, it would be injudicious of me to reveal to Mr. Leffingwell that the papers which he signed were still in my possession," Jeff said.

"What circumstances?"

"I regret to say, your honor, that I must take refuge on constitutional grounds that an answer might incriminate or degrade me," Jeff said.

Judge McClennan glowered. "Your testimony has been most unsatisfactory, Mr. Gorman. I feel that it is not what you have said, but what you have not said, which is important in this case, which apparently has wider ramifications than originally set forth in the formal charge against you. It is my conviction that the ends of justice are not being served here."

The judge paused and bent a stern glance on Jeff. It was apparent he was going to order him to answer the question or be held in contempt. Jeff shot a quick glance at Ramsey, who jumped to his feet.

"Your honor," Ramsey said. "My client is on trial for attempted extortion of funds from Continental Pictures and, with the exception of the unsupported word of Mr. David Lozing and the discredited testimony of LeRoy Moss, there is no evidence whatever to substantiate the charge. Whatever the circumstances surrounding the papers, they have no bearing on the charge as made. Mr. Gorman entered into a settlement agreement in good faith and with the understanding that Mr. Leffingwell, as was stated in the agreement, had power of attorney to act for Continental Pictures. I submit that the case against Mr. Gorman is without foundation, and ask that it be dismissed."

It was apparent that Judge McClennan concurred in this opinion, but was loath to let go of a situation which he was convinced was thoroughly larcenous.

"You may leave the stand, Mr. Gorman," he said at last. Chester Meggs arose, looking completely confused, and announced that the State wished to drop the charge.

"I will dismiss the case when I see fit," McClennan snapped. "I issued a bench warrant for Richard Port. Is he present, bailiff?"

The assistant purchasing agent of Continental was present. Looking ex-

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tremely nervous, he took the stand and, under McClennan's questioning, testified that he had met Rockford in a tavern, and Rockford, drunk, had told him the story of the dictaphone.

"Why didn't you go to Mr. Lozing or the president of the company, Mr. Reagan, with this story, rather than to Mr. Leffingwell?" the judge demanded.

"Well . . . er . . . Mr. Leffingwell seemed to be the man concerned, so I went to him," Port said, rubbing sweat from the palms of his hands. "He asked me not to say anything of it to anyone, and told me he would inform the company's executives."

Jeff winked at Ramsey. "Leffingwell is taking the rap for them all," he said.

Ramsey nodded. "It will wash him up as an attorney. I wish you'd explain this whole thing to me. With half a chance I could have them all up on a perjury charge."

Jeff shook his head. "I couldn't make any money that way."

McClennan dismissed Port irritably and resummoned Moss.

"How do you explain your testimony, Mr. Moss, in view of the fact that it has been proven that this money was paid Mr. Gorman for another purpose?"

Moss wiped his brow. "All I know, your honor, is that it happened like I said. I gave Leffingwell a check for the fifty thousand dollars to pay Gorman, and he said he paid him. I guess he kept the money. Anyway, I want it back."

McClennan favored him with a long, suspicious stare and then permitted him to leave, calling Leffingwell.

"How do you explain the fact that you were allegedly given fifty thousand dollars for the purpose stated by yourself and Mr. Moss, and that you then paid the money to Mr. Gorman in settlement of an accident claim against Continental Pictures, a settlement apparently suggested on your part?"

Mr. Leffingwell answered, his face its customary polite mask. "I am not on trial here, your honor. I contend that the papers introduced by Mr. Gorman are forgeries. The evidence of one expert is not, in my mind, conclusive evidence for so important a decision."

"The court is making the decision, Mr. Leffingwell," McClennan said. "In my opinion, your position in this case has been a disgrace to your profession. I expect the prosecuting attorney to request a bench warrant for your arrest on a charge of perjury, and I will grant it immediately." He looked around the room with an expression of disgust. "Case dismissed."

BARBARA JORDAN was waiting for Jeff in the corridor outside the courtroom.

"Darling!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck, much to the delight of the photographers. "I've got Uncle Rufus lodged in the car outside," she whispered. "Everything's O. K."

"Kiss him again, Miss Jordan," one of the photographers said. "He's Irish."

Barbara complied, asking so everyone within earshot could hear, "Should we tell them, Cash?"

"Well . . . ah . . . I don't know," Jeff said, wondering what the devil she was talking about.

"I think it's silly to keep it a secret any longer," she said, turning to the reporters. "We're engaged." She stripped off her glove, revealing a magnificent diamond. Jimmy Ranger slapped Jeff on the back and threw an arm around him, whispering in his ear, "Now you've really got your foot in the bucket, pal."

Jeff gulped. He looked at Barbara with a stricken expression.

"Don't look so damned sad," she muttered. "You're supposed to be the happiest man on earth, or something—"

Jeff summoned up a smile.

"When's the wedding going to be, Miss Jordan?" one of the reporters asked.

"We haven't set a date as yet."

"What's the idea?" Jeff demanded when they finally broke clear.

"You'd think I was one of the witches from Macbeth," she said petulantly. "What's the matter with being engaged to me?"

"Nothing," Jeff said, somewhat helplessly. The situation seemed to be out of hand. "The idea just hadn't occurred to me. I'd still like to know—"

Barbara draped herself coyly on his arm. "Well, dear, Uncle Rufus said that you didn't prove anything definite against Lozing, but that he's convinced Lozing is a crook. On the other hand, he said he wasn't convinced that you weren't a crook, too—so I thought I'd better do something drastic to save the situation, and I just told him you and I were going to be married, and that he could trust you implicitly. If you did any stealing, you'd steal for the family."

Jimmy Ranger leaned weakly against the side of the court building, howling with laughter. Even Jeff grinned, somewhat ruefully.

"Oh, don't act like that," Barbara said irritably. "You haven't anything to worry about. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. I just want to make sure my picture is produced."

Jimmy recovered himself. "At that, it's a better idea than the one we had. How did Uncle Rufus—I suppose I can call him Uncle Rufus now, too—how did he take it?"

Barbara shrugged. "He said at least I was marrying a man who was interested in making money instead of spending it."

"He doesn't know Cash," Jimmy said. "Well, congratulations, Mr. Gorman."

"Where's Phineas Gardiner?" Jeff demanded dryly."

"Out at the racetrack with Eunice," Jimmy told him.

"His interest in my fate is touching," Jeff commented. "Get hold of him and tell him Jordan is ready to put up his money and we're all ready to move in on Continental. Maybe he'd like to supervise Eunice's next picture."

Jimmy started. "Don't suggest it to him—he might do it, and that's the job I want."

CHAPTER XVII.

CASH TAKES OVER.

PHINEAS GARDINER and Rufus Jordan, once they decided to move, moved with speed. Within five days a special meeting of the board of directors of Continental was held and the permission of the bank obtained for the transaction in which the management of Continental passed to Jeff's brain child, the Motion Picture Management Co.

"Why do we have to have this Raymond Clairborn in here as president of the Motion Picture Management Co.?" Jimmy Ranger complained when they moved into an office at Continental.

"He's fronting for me," Jeff said. "After all, the public, the bank and the stockholders don't understand this situation, and after that trial they know Leffingwell is a crook; they think Lozing was victimized in some way, and they probably are of half a mind that I was involved in a transaction which, if not outrightly dishonest, was at least a piece of border-line trickery."

Jimmy folded his hands and looked piously at the ceiling. "Perish the thought."

Jeff grinned. "Also, Clairborn is a motion-picture man whose name is known, and he knows his business. By the way, be sure to tell him he can't start developing any new female stars without consulting with Rosswell and myself."

"I'll be glad to take care of that department," Jimmy said. "What is Lozing's status here?"

"He's protected in his present position by a contract, and so are all the other executives," Jeff explained. "He and his protégés will try to buck us, of course, but they are responsible to us now. In other words, the board of directors has delegated its authority to us, and we, being on the scene, will be able to exercise it as the board never did."

Jimmy nodded. "Sounds nice and nasty," he said. "Where is Clairborn?"

"Down taking possession of his new office," Jeff remarked innocently. His inter-office communication board sounded. "Mr. Lozing to see you, Mr. Gorman."

Lozing came in white-faced with anger. "You can't do this to me," he shouted, even before the door closed. "I'm protected by a contract."

"What's the trouble?" Jeff asked. "I don't want you to be unhappy. We're all just one big happy family here."

Lozing's gimlet eyes burned with hatred. "You know what the trouble is. You told Clairborn he was to occupy my office."

"I thought you'd be happier in a smaller office, Mr. Lozing," Jeff said. "I have a very esthetic nature, and it seemed to me that Mr. Clairborn fits the furniture there better than you do. He's not only taller, but better upholstered. More imposing, so to speak. He won't rattle around in the place. Lest we have any misunderstanding, there is nothing in your contract about the location of your office."

Lozing shook his fist at Jeff. "This isn't over, Gorman. I won't be made a fool of." His voice rose to a shriek. "I won't, you understand?"

Jeff stared at him levelly. "I think we'll get along fine, Mr. Lozing, if you just keep out of the projection rooms."

Lozing was dumfounded. "You're crazy. I'm vice president in charge of production. No picture can leave here without my approval, and my contract entitles me to see every foot of film shot on this lot."

"O. K.," Jeff said. "Sue me, but keep out of those projection rooms. I've got guards in 'em with orders to throw you out if you put your foot inside the door." He grinned. "I'll welcome a suit if you're so disposed. A lot of interesting information seems to develop out of them."

Trembling, Lozing stared at Jeff for a minute and then turned and rushed from the room wordlessly.

Jimmy frowned. "I don't like this," he said. "He's going off his nut."

"The old needle has been working all right so far," Jeff said. "Why should we stop giving it to him now?"

Jimmy shrugged. "I think you're running a lot of unnecessary risks. You know how these babies act when they're cornered."

Jeff looked at the memo pad before him. "Are you on top of that Hagan business?"

"His mother gets here tomorrow," Jimmy replied. "He had a sister at

Santa Barbara, and they'll bury him there. I told his sister we had offered him seventy-five thousand dollars for a manuscript he was working on and suggested that it might be found in his safe-deposit box. Told her we needed it in a hurry, and she informed the company attorney. He said he believes he'll be able to get it to us tomorrow if we send over a written confirmation of our verbal offer and his acceptance on the night of his death."

"Good!" Jeff replied. "Don't say anything about murder until you have to. Now, have you seen our purchasing agent yet? What's his name?"

"Smolt," Jimmy replied. "I just saw him. When I told him nothing could be bought without my O. K. he got very mad, but he didn't say much. He is a very large guy with a pair of hands like hams. And when he got mad his face got white and a small fresh scar I might otherwise have overlooked showed just below his hairline. In speaking with his assistant, Port, the lad who testified at the trial, I learned that he came in with a piece of adhesive tape on his head last Monday."

Jeff's eyes lighted up. "Good! How was Port?"

"Scared to death. I told him we had him cold on the perjury charge. He talked around and around in circles. Boiled down to this: He gets the biggest assistant's salary in town for being a sort of glorified clerk and hearing and seeing nothing. He isn't actively implicated. He gave me a list of the supply houses from whom we get stuff which isn't too good at prices that are quite high. Not enough larceny to show up like a sore thumb, but plenty over a period of time."

"Good work, Jimmy," Jeff said. "I've been all through everything with Reagan. The books are O. K. No juggling there. They were too smart for that. However, there's not much doubt this is a big conspiracy. And I think the two biggest exhibitors and our sales manager are in on it. These two exhibitors control three chains. They're getting our pictures dirt cheap, and I think there's a kickback. It all looks on the level—bad conditions, all that stuff. But they're running double bills in their A houses, and we have to furnish them with most of their B pictures —they insist. Competition and all that was the argument, but double bills in A houses isn't the general rule, and we have to make so many B's to fill our contract that we're losing dough. I've put a phone call in for the two of them —a round-robin affair. One is in New York and the other is in Chicago. Metcal and Clark."

When the connection was established, Jeff introduced himself. "I'd like to have you gentlemen come out and talk things over," he said. "I realize your contracts have some time before they are up for renewal, but I think we'll have to get down to a more equitable basis."

Metcal answered. "A contract is a contract."

"That goes for me, too," Clark said.

"You realize we're having some changes out here," Jeff said. "I think you'd find it to your advantage to come out and discuss the matter. Or, I can fly East if you prefer."

"There's nothing to talk about," Metcal declared.

"O. K.," Jeff said. "But I feel I should warn you that we are contemplating legal action against some of our executives here who, we regret to say, are suspected of engaging in various practices which have resulted in losses to the corporation. I thought I might be saving you two gentlemen possible embarrassment if we had a friendly discussion."

"We haven't anything to be embarrassed about," Metcal said. "Furthermore, if you don't live up to your contracts, we'll sue you!"

"Go ahead and sue," Jeff said. "I'm cutting my B schedule in half."

Jimmy gulped. "Maybe they haven't anything to do with it. You might be alienating our best customers."

"No customer you lose money on is a good customer," Jeff said. "To hell with 'em. We'll open houses of our own if we have to. There are plenty of theaters for rent."

IT was the next afternoon that Jimmy came in excitedly with Hagan's manuscript.

"There are a bunch of notes here, and if I'm not cockeyed, they're dynamite!"

Jeff took the manuscript and started to read. Soon he began skipping, reading a part here and there. "This is it. Good night—he's got the goods on 'em. When Lozing came out here he came with a bank roll and bought into Regal Pictures. The money came from bootlegging. Then he began to bring his friends out—all with their names changed. Racketeers gone respectable. He got them jobs. Regal got washed out. They lost their dough. Lozing got this job here and soon he began muscling in with his old gang. Funny thing is, he really was a good producer. He wasn't responsible for Regal's collapse."

Jeff looked up. "Anyway, that's the story. Hagan claims they not only were embezzling, but they were trying to wreck the company so they could get control of it. Only a few are here—Grock, Smolt, Lozing and the sales manager. But they've set up companies which Continental buys its supplies from. And our two theater-chain friends are in on it. That's the story. There are names and facts in the notes."

Jimmy whistled. "What do we do?"

"Let 'em convict themselves," Jeff said. "Get Ramsey to get hold of the district attorney and explain the situation. Have him ask them to send some detectives out here and request that the suppliers be shadowed. I'll force their hand. Take this stuff. Have copies of it made. Sit in the room with the stenographers yourself, and don't let anyone else in. Split the manuscript up so nobody'll know exactly what it's all about. Tomorrow have a copy on Lozing's desk when he comes in. Also on Smolt's and Grock's. Send one to Moss, the electrical supplier."

"O. K.," Jimmy said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, issue an order tomorrow that all our employees and executives will have to register their fingerprints. See that copies of the order go to the men mentioned. If they have records, we'll get action—*but fast!*"

JEFF was on a set where Benny Rosswell was making preliminary scenes for Barbara Jordan's picture the next morning, watching Barbara and trying to avoid exhibiting his ignorance of the motion-picture business to a detective lieutenant named McNamara when David Lozing stormed onto the set, waving Hagan's manuscript in one hand and the fingerprinting order in the other.

"That man looks like a maniac," McNamara said.

"That's Lozing," Jeff explained.

The producer stopped in front of them. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, his voice shrill with anger.

"Just a script I thought you might like to see," Jeff said.

"And this order—do you think I will submit to being fingerprinted? It's an insult." Lozing's small eyes were sunk deep in his face.

He didn't sleep last night, Jeff reflected, saying aloud: "What's the matter, Lozing? Afraid to be fingerprinted?" A small crowd had gathered around them, and Jeff prodded Lozing's vanity. "You don't have a criminal record—or do you?"

"Damn you!" Lozing screamed. "Damn you, this is all your fault, you meddler!" He spat out a stream of foul invectives, his small red mouth writhing in horrible grimaces, an insane light rising in his eyes. Finally, an expression of stark madness on his face, he clutched at his hip pocket and brought out a heavy automatic.

Jeff had faced guns before, but never one in the hands of a madman. He couldn't reason with Lozing then; there was nothing he could do to stay his hand. He was paralyzed by indecision as the muzzle of the automatic in Lozing's hand swung up toward him.

A heavy hand struck him a hard blow on the back of the neck, sending him sprawling to his knees, and there were two shots, fired almost simultaneously. There was a clunk on the floor beside him, and splinters flew, a scorched hole appearing in the floor. Looking up, he saw David Lozing, blood swelling through his coat in an ever-widening stain, sag limply to the floor, the gun slipping from his lifeless hand.

Jeff climbed to his feet and turned to Lieutenant McNamara. "Thanks," he said.

The detective lowered his smoking automatic and nodded, his eyes on Lozing. "It's not very nice, killing a man," he said quietly. "But I couldn't take a chance on trying to wing him. He went crazy." The officer shook his head. "Hard to understand—a man with his opportunities." His voice returned to normal. "I'll take charge here, Mr. Gorman. I think you'd better look after the young lady; she looks like she's going to be sick."

Jeff took a firm hold on Barbara's arm.

"Steady," he said quietly. "It's all over now."

She buried her head in his shoulder. "Oh, Cash," she sobbed. "This is get-

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ting like a nightmare. I wish I'd never started it—poor Pat Hagan."

"Whoa, now," he said. "Don't start thinking that way, darling. Pat knew the risks he was running, and I think they suspected him, anyway. You've been a soldier, Barbara. Thumbs up. And do something for me—get hold of your uncle Rufus."

Two hours later, Phineas Gardiner and Rufus Jordan looked up from the copies of the manuscript Hagan had written and the data he had gathered. "Incredible," Jordan said. "In another year they would have obtained control of this company with its own money."

Lieutenant McNamara was announced. "I've just been talking with headquarters," he reported. "They've all been picked up trying to get out of town. Leffingwell, too, jumped bond. Apparently Pat Hagan had the general idea. Moss talked—turned State's evidence. The thing Hagan hadn't yet found out explains the solidity of their organization—they were all one family. Lozing and Leffingwell were brothers. Moss was a cousin. He named the two exhibitors in the East, one of whom is Lozing's son and the other a nephew. They've skipped, but we'll get 'em. Probably trying to get to South America."

"They must have cleared out yesterday after I talked to them," Jeff said.

McNamara nodded: "They all bootlegged in Brooklyn and Boston during prohibition—that's where they got their dough. Then Lozing got out of the rackets and came out here with a bank roll and bought in. The rest of them thought he was a sucker until he began to make good and then when bootlegging began getting unprofitable they started drifting out under different names and he got them jobs at Regal. They stayed honest until Regal collapsed when the Hickson chain folded and left them without any first-run houses. Then Leffingwell landed here and began working them in. They had some dough and cooked up this plot. It was worked with kickbacks to the general kitty. That's why nothing ever showed in their income taxes. That kickback dough just went into the safe-deposit vaults. They were going to use it eventually to get control of the company when the time was ripe. It was quite a scheme. Seems Lozing couldn't stand having been a big shot—one of the biggest figures in the industry—and then having to play second fiddle. Guess you were right, Mr. Gorman, when you kidded him. He had one of those Napoleonic complexes."

"How about the 'accidents'?"

"Murder," McNamara replied. "Rex Jones and the other two. It was the only way they could get the old purchasing agent out of his job. Jones and the other director stumbled across something dangerous to the outfit. Grock engineered the 'accidents' on orders from the family council headed by Lozing. Grock was a Brooklyn gun punk, but I guess he was the toughest one of the bunch. He liked to arrange those accidents. And he tried to kill you—that one was without orders. He heard why you were here and when Rosswell raised his hand, he saw a perfect alibi and passed the signal along that dropped the boat on you."

Jeff expelled a long breath. "Pat Hagan?"

"Smolt held his arms and Grock put the powder to his nostrils," McNamara said. "Moss is still talking down there —I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "One thing—

how was Leffingwell able to practice law?"

McNamara grinned. "He was Lozing's younger brother. When Lozing was bootlegging, he decided he ought to have a mouthpiece in the family. Their name was Crackowitz and he had Leffingwell petition that it be changed because it was difficult to spell, et cetera. So Leffingwell did and Lozing sent him through law school."

When McNamara had left, Gardiner was the first to speak. "This leaves us sitting pretty. Can this place make a profit during the next twelve months?"

Jeff nodded. "Now it can. For one thing—we can void those contracts with the chains. Naturally, we eliminate all the graft here from the purchasing department and we may get a sizable slice of money from that kitty of theirs."

"Maybe those two in the East got away with that?" Jordan suggested.

Jeff shook his head. "I doubt it. Lozing would want that some place where he would be the only one who could get to it."

Gardiner smiled. "And we have a ten-year option to manage this place with forty percent of the profit to us."

"Let's see what kind of an offer we can get from the stockholders for that option," Jeff said. "Under the circumstances, the bank will probably be glad to advance the necessary money for a cash settlement."

"To hell with that," said Gardiner. "This looks like a gold mine to me and it didn't cost us anything. I want to hang onto it." He looked at Jordan.

"Me, too," said Jordan.

"Well, I want a quick profit and out," Jeff said. "Either of you want my third in the management company? You can have it for two million dollars."

Both spoke instantly: "I'll take it."

Jeff laughed. "Any bids?"

Jordan considered. "Yes, I'll give you—"

"Don't be a sucker," Phineas Gardiner remarked. "He's trying to needle us into bidding against each other. I'll take half and you take half and we'll each pay him a million."

Uncle Rufus grinned. "O. K.," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, the two million is all in the family anyway."

Phineas Gardiner's frosty blue eyes turned on Jeff shrewdly. "When are you and Barbara getting married?" he asked.

"We haven't set a date yet," Jeff observed dryly.

"You mustn't forget to let me know," Gardiner said, his tone dripping sweetness and light. "I wouldn't miss that for anything."

THE situation with Barbara weighed heavily on Jeff's mind at lunch when he related the McNamara news to her. Finally he broached the subject by the great circle route.

"By the way," he asked her, "when are you going to give my ring back and turn me out in the cold world with a broken heart?"

Barbara twisted her hand about, admiring the diamond. "I think I'll keep it as a souvenir, darling," she said. "After all, I did pay for it." She opened her violet eyes very wide. "Besides, that would be so sudden. We only announced our engagement a week ago and when my picture is finished I'll be going East—it would really be quite an advantage to be engaged to me for a while in New York. I know all the best banks and corporations personally."

Jimmy Ranger consoled him later. "I wouldn't worry too much about it; when her picture is finished she probably won't even speak to you. That's a dirty trick on a swell gal in my opinion. Think how you'd feel if you played a part straight and with plenty of the old pathos and found out it was a comedy."

Benny Rosswell overheard him. "She'll get over it if the picture's a box-office hit—and I think it's going to click. You know, in time, I could make an actress out of her—"

Jeff grinned at Jimmy: "And how's your love life coming along?"

Ranger slowly turned red. "Listen, Cash, I've been thinking things over and I think it's time I settled down—you know, steady job. There's a real future out here and I just . . . er . . . well, I thought I'd like to stay on. Possibly a vice president of the purchasing department."

Jeff stared at him. "Well, I'll be damned. Boy, you're asking for trouble."

A tempestuous female voice spoke up from behind Jeff. "I'm the nicest trouble he'll ever run into." Jeff swung around to find himself confronted by Eunice, who looked thoroughly aroused. "Besides, he's asking for trouble and that's something you have a constitutional right to in this country. Why don't you go back to Brazil and water your rubber plants? The National Defense Commission may need some of that stuff pretty soon."

"Maybe you have something there," Jeff grinned. "The only trouble is, my rubber trees won't give like they ought to—"

Eunice was not interested. "That's your problem. But if Jimmy wants to stay around here and be a vice president, he can stay."

"You seem rather positive," Jeff remarked, his temper rising at the possible loss of Ranger. "Says *who?*"

Eunice smiled her million-dollar smile: "Says Phineas Gardiner, sweetheart."

Benny Rosswell whistled softly and looked at the ceiling. "I guess that takes care of the question-and-answer program for today," he said. "You have no one to blame but yourself, Cash. You have, so to speak, bitten yourself in the leg. It's an old Hollywood custom."

Jeff grinned confidentially at Jimmy: "When you get tired of the sunshine, I'll meet you in New York."

THE END

★ ★

A stranger visits Cash Gorman and Jimmy Ranger with an offer of a seven-dollar premium on Columbia Axle stock. This would be a nice profit but Thomas Jefferson Gorman doesn't own a single share of it, though Phineas T. Gardiner has tried to "stick" him with a block. One hour later as Cash is trying to escape the snare of the sharp Wall Street financier the stranger is dead. Murdered!

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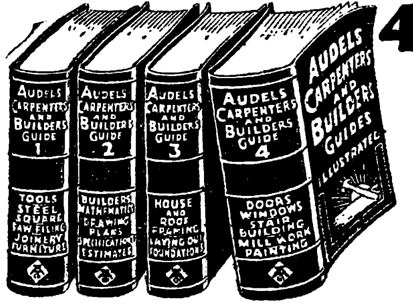
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ways and means of pleas, what to say—how to jam up the arresting officer so that a prima facie case might not be established.

Remember that this was in the days before the existence of modern police methods. Police officers now have pickpocket squads which specialize in this work. They know the manner of working of each pickpocket, and thus when a man is robbed at a certain type of event, the police squad will most often know exactly who is guilty.

Such methods of detection hadn't been developed when the cannon mob advised by Harry Beatum existed. Harry's help was a great asset to this mob. Although Harry didn't go into the field with them, he booked them as an agent would. He would read the out-of-town papers and line up the pickpockets for meetings, conventions, fairs and the like. He wanted no fee. All he asked was that all the excess stuff be turned over to him.

It was not jewelry which interested Harry. He collected only the excess—wallets, cards of identification, useless checks and letters. The mob didn't know what he did with these things, and they didn't care. They thought he simply collected them, like stamps.

Continued on page 113

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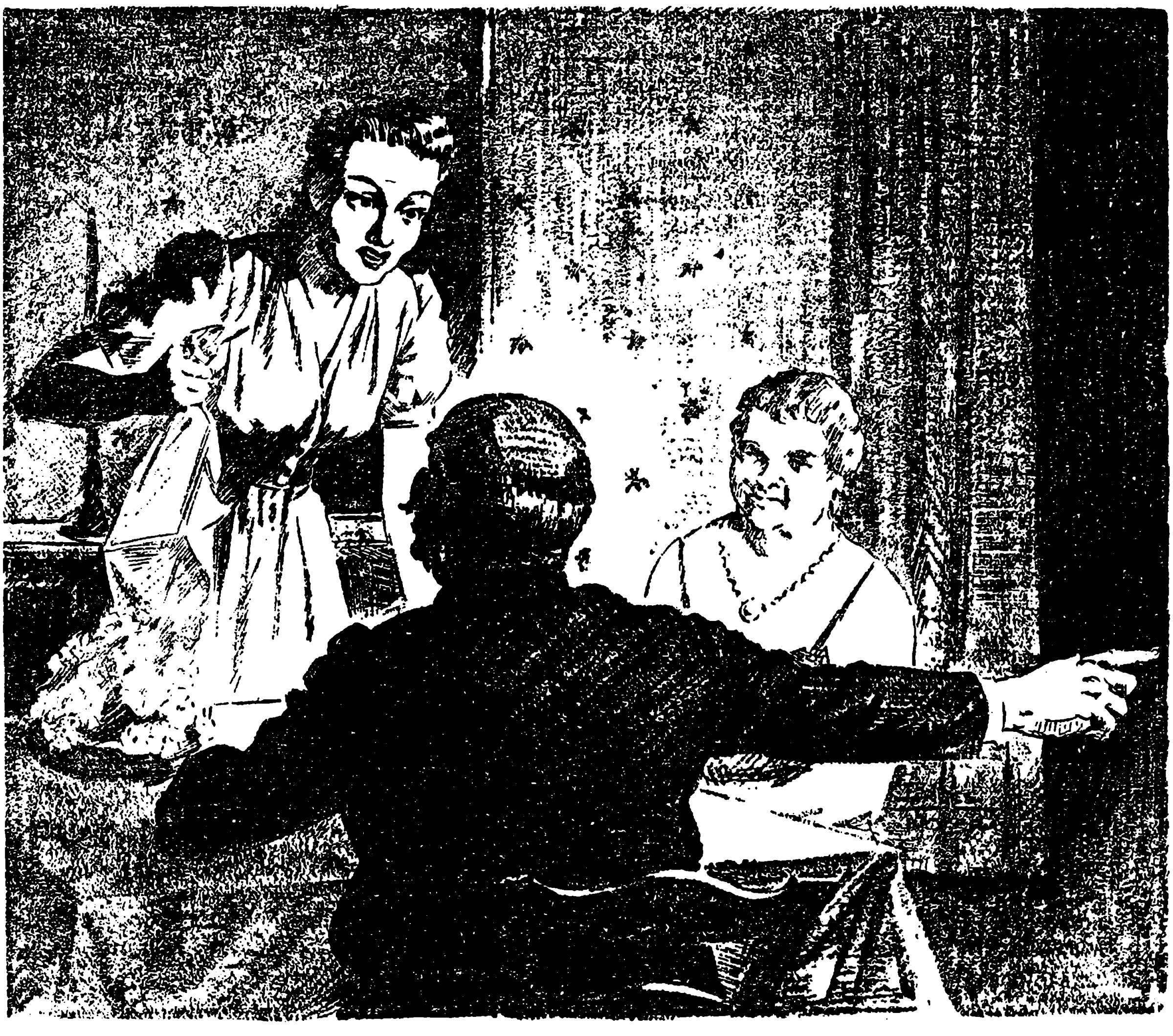
Merchant Of Vengeance

BY JESS CARVER

• Senator Flick bares his fangs for a large bite of Culpepper's dough in a new Cider Creek deal.

It was spring in Cider Creek. As the sap yawned and eased upward in the trunks of the trees and bock-beer signs sprang into being, to bloom on fence and barn, so did ambition stir in the bony breast of Culpepper Twig, Cider Creek's streamlined Croesus. As the gangly Culpepper surveyed a world engaged in emerging from its long winter snooze, he knew by the tingling of his large ears and the twitching of his spikelike nose that further financial adventure lurked behind the next turn in the road.

There was no doubt in Culpepper's mind that, whatever undertaking the fates might heave his way, he would emerge from the large end of the horn. He had become a person of some impor-



tance in Cider Creek, arising to a position of respect from a very humble and very questionable beginning, champion of Dave Mooch's emporium of pool and billiards. He had run a modest legacy of a few acres of stony ground and twenty live, very much alive, goats into a bank roll of considerable size, provided one is willing to concede a fifteen-thousand-dollar roll as being considerable. More important, in so doing, he had got the better of Cider Creek's most prominent citizen, Senator Delcimus Flick, banker and collector of mortgages. Ceder Creek cared for the senator in the same ratio a bull does for a red undershirt, and when the gawky Culpepper had pitched a very fast one past the senatorial nose, Cider Creek had stood on its collective hind legs and cheered.

The senator had never forgiven the Twig person for sticking him with his legacy of a score of goats at twenty-five bucks per stick. The goats had been parked on Culpepper's inherited acres, which happened to adjoin (to windward) the senator's estate, Flickacres, on the outskirts of the village. Senator Flick had been forced to purchase the beasts, and then, in getting rid of same, had inadvertently resold them to one Jeff Applegate, young Twig's immediate cousin.

All that was bad enough. Next to a dime, the thing the senator could not stand losing was face. Within a few weeks after the episode of the goats, Culpepper grabbed off an option on a ramshackle, deserted iron foundry, and, by a fortunate streak of luck at the racetrack, raised the money to lift same, buy the property and resell it to some dough-heavy gents representing a European on the lookout for scrap iron. And at a very, very pretty profit!

Cider Creek had settled back on its collective haunches to await the third round of the bout between Culpepper and the senator. It was not long in coming, with Culpepper again emerging with a hero's wreath adorning his slanting brow. He saved not only his own money, but that of his rival and half a dozen other Cider Creekians from a high-power swindler named Colonel Goobey.

Although Culpepper had saved the senator's face and considerable of his fortune, Senator Flick's hatred for the young pool shark multiplied. There wasn't a person in Cider Creek who was not aware that the senator would never rest until he had pinned Culpepper to the cross.

As has been said previously, winter had passed, overcoats were either back in the moth balls or in hock shops, and spring had arrived. Culpepper craved action, what sort he did not know. Having fifteen grand to crave with, he might have known his period of inaction was not due to last. And indeed, it did not.

Culpepper was idly stroking the balls about one of Mr. Mooch's green-covered tables one afternoon when he was approached by Sebastian Tilt, one of Cider Creek's two leading legal lights and personal attorney to Senator Flick. Mr. Tilt was effusive, unusually so, in his greeting. He was one of those whose skin had been saved by Culpepper's astuteness in the Colonel Goobey deal.

"Cully," he confided, "you know, I sorta feel I owe you somethin'—after the way you outsmarted that city slicker. You're a smart boy, Cully, a smart boy. I always said you'd amount to somethin'. Now then, I'm goin' to do you a big favor. I know somethin' you oughta know, somethin' that'll make you a lot of money. I can make you one of the biggest businessmen in this here town!"

Culpepper blinked. The great Sebastian Tilt offering to do him a favor! An extrasensory phenomena—a hunch, to the boys in the back room—told him to beware. But he remained mum, permitting the attorney to continue.

"It's this way, Culpepper," went on Counselor Tilt. "I happen to know Jake Pooley wants to get rid of the Knick-Knackery—cheap. It can be bought for a song and, with the kind of money you have, you can sing just the right tune. Jake don't know I'm talking to you and no one else in town knows Jake's figuring on retirin'. Now then, supposing I sound him out on his price an' act as your agent? Say, for the . . . er . . . usual ten percent?"

Culpepper studied a worn cube of cue chalk, slowly putting his favorite cue back in its rack. The Knick-Knackery was Cider Creek's largest store, at least in point of dimension, if not in volume of business. It was a barnlike, two-story structure of considerable age. The Knick-Knackery handled everything from mustache cups (1901 vintage) to modern portable radios, from lipstick to laundry soap. Indeed, should one stroll inside the vast emporium in search of a helicopter, to be purchased on the installment plan, he would be cynical indeed not to expect to be shown same.

The second floor was given over to an even more weird selection of goods which had been purchased years back and, remaining unsold, been finally relegated to the limbo of the forgotten, stored away under a protecting cover of

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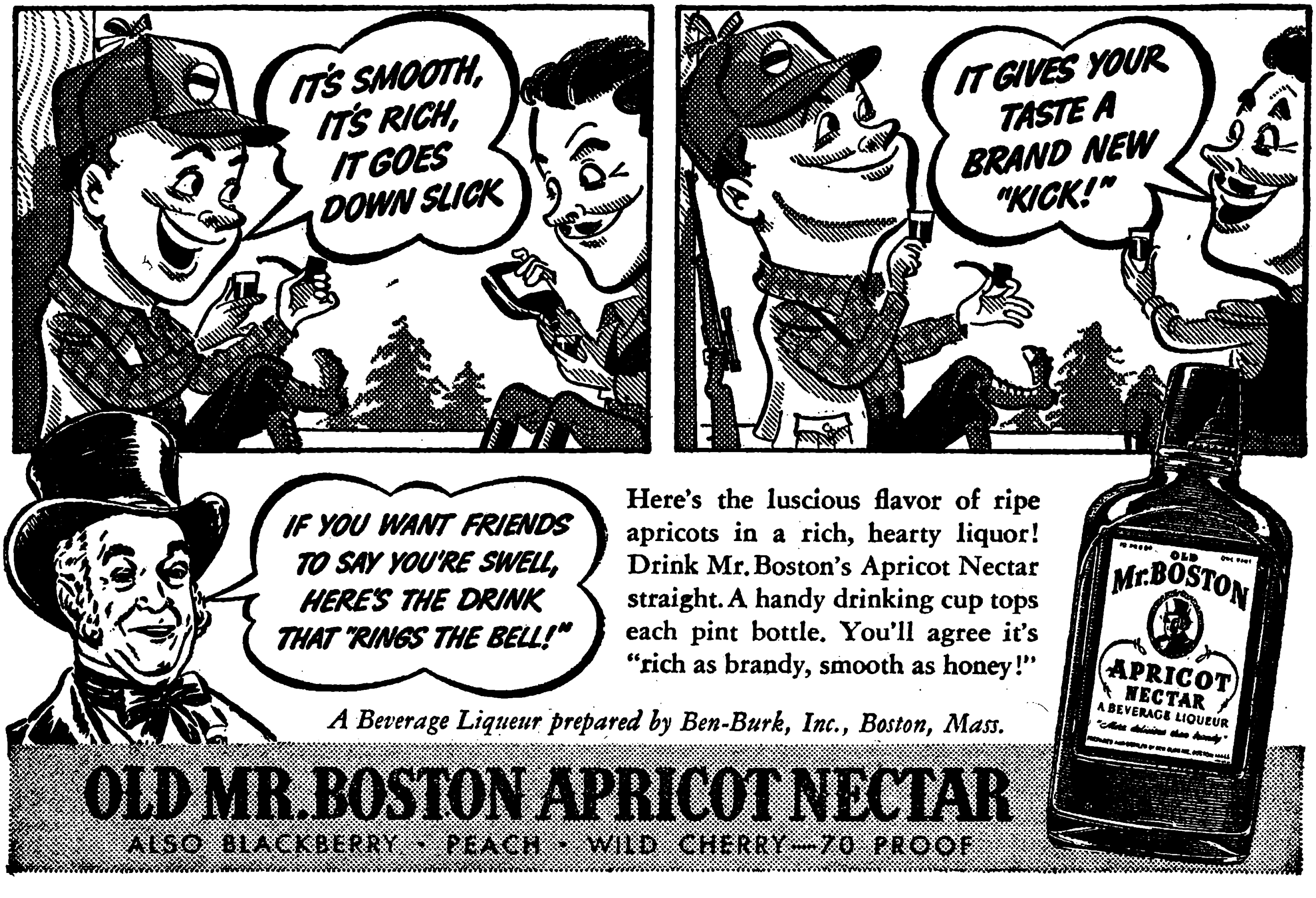
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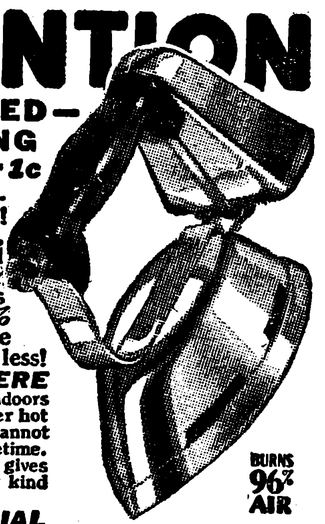

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dust and cobwebs. There was old, antiquated furniture, coal stoves, buggy whips, old crockery, churns, plows, baby carriages, rolls of tar paper—in short, the loft would have served as a splendid storehouse for a country-fair bingo game.

"It wouldn't hurt none," mused Culpepper, "to look into the deal. I don't know much about runnin' a store, but—"

"Like fallin' off a log, Cully," the lawyer put in hurriedly. "You're a smart young feller. You'll make a fortune. I'll see Jake today and we'll see what is what."

He departed then, after swearing Culpepper to maintain complete secrecy until the deal could be consummated.

THERE were a few things Counselor Tilt had not made clear to Mr. Twig. First of all, he had neglected to mention that Senator Flick had sent him out on the mission. Secondly, he had neglected to recount the fact that Jake Pooley had been slowly starving to death with the Knick-Knackery—and that he personally owed the senator the small sum of ten thousand dollars on a mortgage, secured only by the run-down store. And fourth, and known only to the senator and the owner, the joint hadn't the slightest chance of survival, for not only was its business shot, but it was soon to have for competition one of the great chain of Eeezee-Pay stores.

"We got him over the barrel now," chortled Senator Flick when the lawyer

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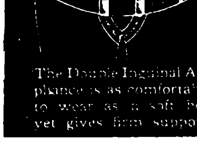

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reported back to him. "He'll fall for it, sure as shootin'. We'll sell him the place and for plenty, only we'll make him think he's grabbin' off a bargain. I can hold off the Eeezee-Pay crowd till we hook Twig. Then—zowie!"

The senator figuratively licked his chops over thoughts of revenge.

In due course, Counselor Tilt again sought out Culpepper, laying before him what ostensibly was Jake Pooley's proposition. For ten thousand dollars in cash and a mortgage for five, Culpepper would have the Knick-Knackery, lock, stock and barrel.

"Why, Cully," exclaimed Mr. Tilt, "the property alone is worth every cent of fifteen thousand! You'll have enough money to fix the place up a bit and, with the business you ought to do, seein' as how you're so popular hereabouts, you'll be able to pay off that little mortgage in no time."

On the surface, the deal did not appear to be such a stinker. Culpepper was shown the Pooley books, as fine a set of doctored documents as ever escaped the peering perusal of a district attorney. Culpepper sighed and signed on the dotted line. The Knick-Knackery became his own.

Poor relations, even ones as nifty when it came to looks as Janie Coffee, were so many lumps in Senator Delcimus Flick's mashed potatoes. Janie was both a poor relation and an extremely pretty one. She had a chassis no mortal designer ever will be able to repeat—even in technicolor. Men took one look at Jane and did figurative flipflops. But she was poor and she was "on" the Flicks. Her mother, Mrs. Abigail Flick's sister, died suddenly, leaving barely enough money to enable her daughter to reach Cider Creek. Senator Flick fussed and fumed and spluttered, but people do not turn destitute female relations adrift, even if they possess only a fraction of a normal-sized heart. So Janie resided at Flickacres.

Janie was a proud girl and had no hankering to live off the fat of the senator's purse. She desired a job, but jobs in Cider Creek, especially for girls, were as scarce as optimistic football coaches. Then came the word of Culpepper Twig's purchase of the Knick-Knackery, duly announced by Jonas Peters in his *Daily Wallop,* the Cider Creek newspaper. Jones gave Cully quite a send-off.

Janie went to her aunt Abigail. "Won't this Mr. Twig be needing help in his store?" she inquired. "Couldn't Uncle Delcimus get me a job with him?"

After Auntie Abby had descended from the ceiling, which she had hit at the suggestion that the senator intercede with Culpepper Twig, she went to some pains to explain the state of relations between the two. "Don't ever even mention that young no-good's name to your uncle," the good lady warned. "My heavens! The senator asking Culpepper Twig for a favor! Never!"

But Janie was a purposeful lass and the next day she presented herself before Mr. Twig and asked for a job. Culpepper was properly impressed. In fact, he was knocked bow-legged by the dazzling Janie.

"If you know anything about bookkeepin', like you say you learned in college," he finally managed to stutter, "you sure can help me out. This is all sorta new to me, an' I'll need plenty of help. Lemme see . . . how about fifteen dollars a week?"

Fifteen bucks per was top-hole dough in Cider Creek. Janie accepted the offer on the spot.

"Now I can pay for my room and

board!", she exclaimed to her aunt. "And I'm sure Uncle Delcimus won't be terribly angry."

As a matter of fact, Uncle Delcimus was anything but displeased. Not only did he welcome a paying relative in his household, but, with Janie employed by Culpepper, he, the senator, would have a direct line into the store. He'd know precisely how things were going—if at all.

Janie spent two weeks getting the Knick-Knackery books into a semblance of order and three doing over Culpepper. By the power of suggestion, plus the power of her smile, she renovated Mr. Twig. He blossomed out with his pants pressed in a suit that really fitted his angular frame. He shaved daily, had his nails manicured and was meticulous about keeping cue-chalk dust off his vest. Janie worked wonders with the store's books and miracles with the store's proprietor.

It wasn't long, however, before Culpepper came to realize there had been monkey business included in the deal he'd made with Tilt and Pooley. After the first week, during which the townsfolk gave evidence of their good will by leaving a few bucks in his till, they went back to making the comparatively short trip to the city for the bulk of their buying. They'd been doing so for years, a fact which had been carefully withheld from Culpepper's ken by the conspirators.

Culpepper was on the hook and the senator let him dangle. He was powerful enough to influence the Eeezee-Pay people to stay out of town until he knew Culpepper was really stuck. He waited until a few days before the date when the first mortgage payment was due. Then the bolt was released.

The young merchant was idly twiddling his fingers in the doorway of his emporium, vaguely considering attacking the disorder of the second floor, when Editor Peters came storming down the street, a sheet of paper fluttering from his fist. Reaching Culpepper, he thrust the sheet before the young man's startled gaze.

"Read that!" Peters exploded. "Of all the lousy, rotten luck—"

Puzzled, Culpepper took the paper. It proved to be an advance proof on an advertisement, telling the good citizens of Cider Creek that, come the fifteenth of the following month, the Eeezee-Pay Co. would open a store in the town. "The location," read the ad, "will be in the building formerly occupied by the Knick-Knackery store." The ad was marked, "Hold For Release."

"What's it all about, Cully?" the editor demanded. "I smell a rat. I'll bet me a busted leg that senator's behind this. Tell me, have they got you up against the wall?"

Culpepper nodded gloomily. "That's about the size of it, Peters."

He turned then and walked slowly back to his cubbyhole of an office, tossing the ad down before Janie. "I guess your job's fizzled, Janie," he muttered. "I guess I'm a gone goose. Looks like I throwed me a seven as a businessman —at the wrong time."

Ignoring the girl's expression of sympathy, he left the office and clambered slowly up the dark, narrow stairs to the gloomy second floor.

SENATOR FLICK made the mistake of gloating over the forthcoming fall of Culpepper Twig at supper that evening before his niece. "I'll show that young whippersnapper he can't make a fool of Delcimus Flick," he bragged. "He can't meet his mortgage payments, an' we'll close him up. I mean, I'll have Jake Pooley foreclose on him, quicker'n a wink. Twig will be back sleepin' under one of Dave Mooch's pool tables where he belongs."

Janie sat white-faced, seething with inward anger. Finally she could stand no more. Flinging down her napkin, she stormed to her feet. She faced her uncle, her eyes blazing forth darts of pure contempt. "Culpepper isn't beaten yet," she snapped. "And he won't be, either. And I hate you . . . you *stinker!*"

The senator sat aghast. He'd been called a lot of names in his time, but "stinker" was something new. "Go to your room, young lady!" he bellowed. "And stay there until I send for you."

Brave words, those which Jane had flung in her uncle's purpled face. Brave, but, as she realized later, empty. What could her young employer do? Certainly he could not meet his mortgage payments, and she knew Pooley could, and would, foreclose. And even if he were able to remain in business, by no stretch of anyone's imagination could he hope to compete with the powerful Eezee-Pay store.

Jane reached the store early the next morning, ignoring her uncle's command to stay in her room until sent for. She arrived at the Knick-Knackery before Culpepper, and, letting herself in, threw herself into another inspection of the books, seeking in vain to find a possible successful out for her harassed employer. To no avail. For no reason, then, she climbed the stairs to the second floor, taking in its disorder and clutter and hopelessness with saddened eyes and drooping spirit. She moved listlessly about, peering into dusty boxes and cases, prying into moldy packages and bundles.

In one corner, an oddly marked box, of evident age, attracted her wandering

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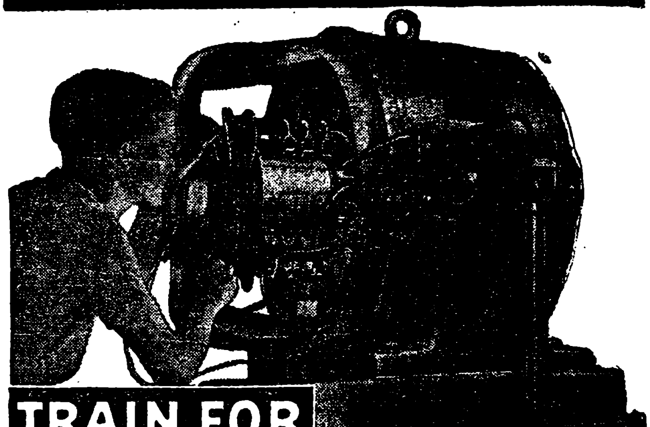

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attention. She raised the lid and looked in. The box was filled with dirt-incrusted pottery, in various shapes and sizes. She picked up a large platter, idly drawing a dainty finger across its dusty surface. Suddenly she became intent and a spasm of uncontrolled excitement stiffened her body. She gave a gasp of unbelief and, with her handkerchief, quickly rubbed the platter clean. Holding her breath, she turned it over, to read the trademark on the under side. Then she gave a squeal of delight and literally flew down the stairs and all but embraced Culpepper as he wearily and unhappily entered the store.

The Knick-Knackery was not opened for business that day. When the 11:08 pulled out for the city, Janie and a bewildered Culpepper were aboard. They left no word, not even with Dave Mooch, where they were going or why.

A radiant Janie and a still-bewildered, but happy, Culpepper returned to Cider Creek on an early-evening train. They were not alone. With them was an unprepossessing stranger who, from his general appearance, might have been an eccentric millionaire or a professor of bugology at some small college. The threesome hurried to the Knick-Knackery, and the lights burned late on the second floor of the vast structure. When, shortly before midnight, the trio parted on the sidewalk in front of the Potter House, where the stranger was to spend the night, there were handclasps both grave and happy, and, after the stranger had entered the hotel, Janie and Culpepper swung happily down the street in the direction of Dad Murphy's Elite Eatery, to celebrate over a hamburger or two.

There was no spirit of celebration in the bank office of Senator Flick the next morning, however. The senator had summoned Jake Pooley for final instructions for the ultimate undoing of Culpepper. Jake put in his appearance, right enough, but his opening sentence left the senator pop-eyed with amazed anger. "Cully's paid off the entire mortgage, senator," Jake announced. "Gave me a check for the entire amount 'bout an hour ago. I dunno where he got it, but he did. Check's signed by a guy named Quimby. Never heard of him, but the thing looks O. K."

News had a way of getting about Cider Creek—but fast. One of the reasons Senator Delcimus Flick suddenly decided to take a trip was to escape the effect the news of Culpepper Twig's latest victory had on fellow Cider Creekians. Janie, the senator's own niece, proved to be the heroine, or villainess, of the story, depending on whether you were a Twig or a Flick fan.

During her college days, Janie had dabbled somewhat in the study of ceramics. Her interest had become centered on the output of the famous Wedgewood potteries, Wedgewood & Co., Ltd., of England. The box she had unearthed, quite accidently, in the loft of Cully's store had contained rare and unusual Wedgewood. Jane had not been certain, but she'd rushed Culpepper off to the city, to the great Quimby Galleries, and secured an audience with the famous collector and authority, J. Wellington Quimby himself. She'd been correct—the pottery which had lain so long in Culpepper's dusty second floor was of great value. J. Wellington had accompanied the happy couple back to Cider Creek, and on the spot, after a careful inspection, paid ten thousand dollars for the lot.

But that had not been all. While in the city, Janie had dragged her whoozy employer to the offices of the Eeezee-Pay Co., where she had forced him to open direct negotiations for the sale of the Knick-Knackery. The Eeezee-Pay officials had been interested, and when they learned Senator Flick had been holding them up for a highbinder sum for the store, were more than glad to deal directly with Culpepper. They bought the place, stock and all, for fifteen thousand dollars. Thanks, then, to Janie, Culpepper emerged with a ten-thousand-dollar profit after all returns were in.

Great was the rejoicing in Cider Creek.

"I'll bet me," quoth Jonas Peters, "that Culpepper gets himself a wife 'most any day now. I'll bet me the weddin' bells will be ringin' loud and long an' them young folks will be sniffin' them orange blossoms—pronto."

Jonas, of course, was only guessing. Janie was the only one who knew.

Culpepper? Well, Culpepper was only a man and what man ever had anything to say about a wedding?

THE END.

* *

Will Senator Flick attain the evasive status . . . a victorious conqueror over wiley, lucky, or indolent Twig? Don't fail to meet Culpepper in his return engagement coming up hot and furious in a spirited encounter with the angry solon upon which rests the case of Culpepper Twig versus Senator Delcimus Flick. They are back in a hilarious return engagement in the next Wizard on sale March 26.

* *

Know your money!

THE UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE

Treasury Dept.

in co-operation with

STREET & SMITH MAGAZINES

cautions you to . . .

FRANK J. WILSON
Chief, U.S. Secret Service

STREET & SMITH Magazines are co-operating with Uncle Sam in the drive to have people become more familiar with United States currency, in order to wipe out counterfeiting. The Secret Service has made almost unbelievable strides in the past few years. With the co-operation of everyone, counterfeiting should be eliminated altogether. Remember, the counterfeiter does not rob Uncle Sam; he robs the individual who happens to be holding the counterfeit money, so it is for your own welfare that you should learn to know your money. Here, briefly, are some suggestions to help you:

TYPES OF CURRENCY

The only three types of currency printed by the United States Government for circulation are:

1. FEDERAL RESERVE NOTES, which bear GREEN serial numbers and seal.
2. UNITED STATES NOTES, which bear RED numbers and seal.
3. SILVER CERTIFICATES, which bear BLUE numbers and seal.

PORTRAITS

Denominations of bills may be identified by portraits as follows:

WASHINGTON	on all	$1.00	bills
JEFFERSON	on all	$2.00	bills
LINCOLN	on all	$5.00	bills
HAMILTON	on all	$10.00	bills
JACKSON	on all	$20.00	bills
GRANT	on all	$50.00	bills
FRANKLIN	on all	$100.00	bills

HOW TO DETECT COUNTERFEIT BILLS

1. Know Your Money!

2. Compare the suspected bill with a genuine of the same type and denomination. Observe carefully the following features:

(a) Portrait: Genuine is lifelike, stands out from oval background which is a fine screen of regular lines; notice particularly the eyes. The counterfeit is dull, smudgy or unnaturally white; scratchy; background is dark with irregular and broken lines.

(b) Seal: On genuine, sawtooth points around rim are identical and sharp. On counterfeit sawtooth points are usually different, uneven, broken off.

(c) Serial Numbers: Genuine distinctive style, firmly and evenly printed; same color as seal. Counterfeit, style different, poorly printed, badly spaced, uneven in appearance.

(d) Paper: Genuine bills are printed on distinctive paper containing very small red and blue silk threads.

3. Rubbing a bill will not prove whether it is genuine or counterfeit; ink will rub off of either.

4. Remember—Not All Strangers Are Counterfeiters, But All Counterfeiters Are Likely To Be Strangers!

HOW TO DETECT COUNTERFEIT COINS

1. Know Your Money!

2. Ring all coins on a hard surface. Genuine coins sound clear and bell-like. Counterfeits sound dull.

3. Feel all coins; most counterfeit coins feel greasy.

4. Compare the reeding (the corrugated outer edge) of a suspected coin with one known to be genuine. The ridges on genuine coins are distinct and evenly spaced. On counterfeit coins they are poorly spaced and irregular.

5. Cut the edge of suspected coins. Most counterfeits are made of soft metal which can be easily cut with a knife.

6. Test suspected silver coins with acid. Scrape the surface and apply drop of acid. If bad, the coin will turn black unless it has a high silver content. Silver test acid solution may be purchased at any drugstore.

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT CHECKS

Know Your Indorsers!

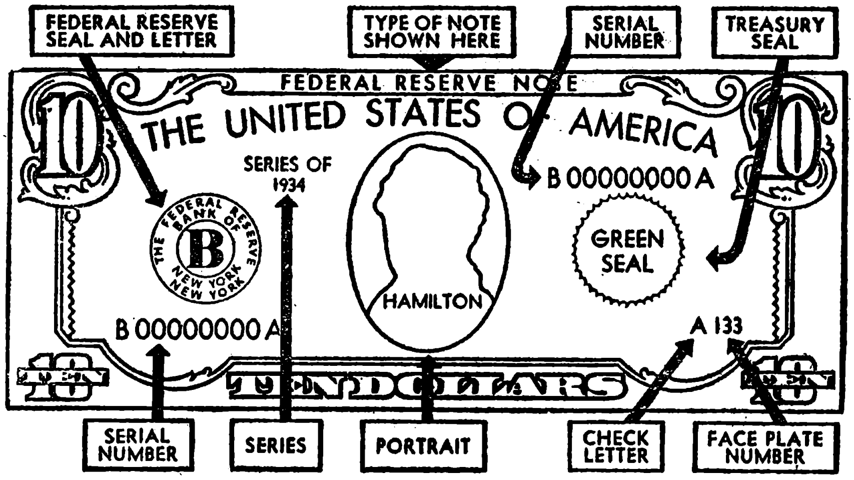
Of the millions of Treasury checks issued yearly by the Government, many are stolen from letter boxes or in other ways, and must then be forged before the proceeds can be gained. It is imperative that anyone cashing a Government check know the payee, compare his signature with the indorsement or require good identification. In the case of WPA workers the various States issue identification cards with the worker's number, signature and sometimes description.

Storekeepers should compare the number and signature on the card with the number opposite payee's name on check and with the indorsement. A check with address far removed from the place where presented should be cause for suspicion. Bear in mind that anyone cashing a Government check which has been stolen, forged or altered may lose the money exchanged for it, since the Government will not honor it if the rightful payee has been defrauded.

The United States Secret Service has prepared pamphlets, from time to time, which are mailed free to those requesting them. Send your name and address to U. S. Secret Service, Treasury Department, Washington, D. C., asking for these pamphlets, and learn more about how to protect yourself from counterfeiters. A penny postal card will do for the request; there is no charge for any of the material the Secret Service has prepared.

TO KNOW YOUR MONEY

Study this diagram which illustrates the position of important features of currency referred to in this article.



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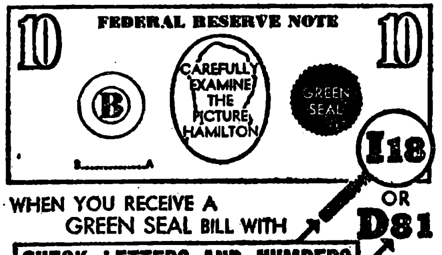

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CHECK LETTERS AND NUMBERS

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PLACE THIS NOTICE ON OR NEAR YOUR CASH REGISTER

WHEN A STRANGER GIVES YOU A COUNTERFEIT BILL

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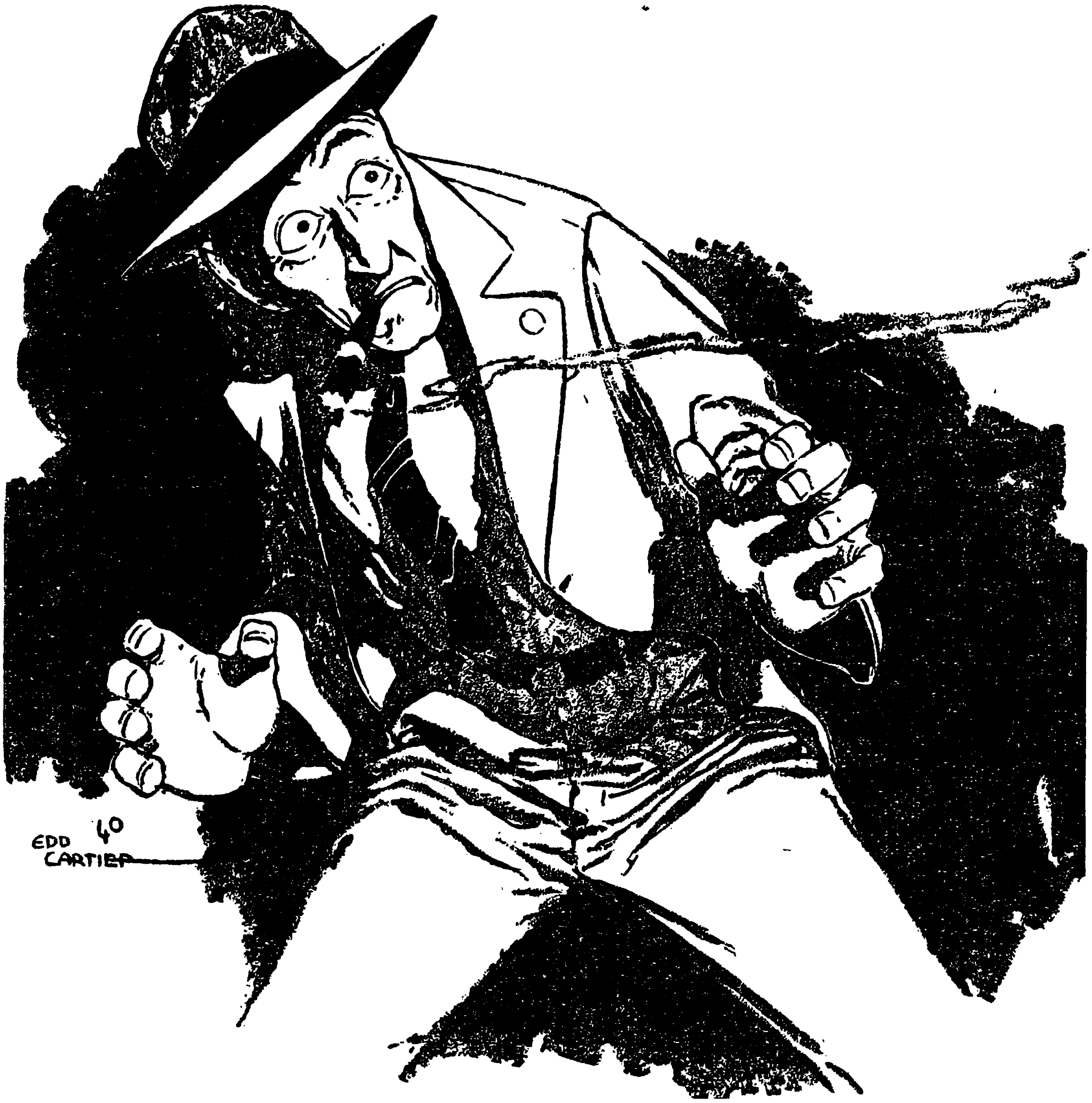
3. DELAY THE PASSER UNDER A PRETEXT.
4. AVOID ARGUMENT; IF NECESSARY, TELL THEM THE POLICE WILL HANDLE THE MATTER.
5. WRITE DOWN A DESCRIPTION IF THE PASSER LEAVES.
6. TAKE THE TAG NUMBERS OF ANY CARS INVOLVED.



FALSE ALARM

BY ARTHUR MANN

• The inventive genius of Egon Hauser brings another lemon to the promotive brain of Joe Feder.

SPRIGHTLY was the step of Joe Feder, president of Ace Promotions, Inc.; as he placed an authoritative key in the door lock and admitted himself to the office. Sprightly were the thoughts that lighted his thin, cigar-punctured face, for this was the morning when Egon Hauser, inventive genius extraordinary, would produce the latest germination of his fertile brain, and the result would be a veritable springboard to riches.

"They can be printed by the billions!" Feder exclaimed softly to himself for the simple reason that he was first to arrive at the office. "They can be sold all over the world like phonograph records."

He chuckled softly and marveled anew at Egon Hauser's mental dexterity.

"Imagine it!" he said, and found it hard to do so. "A whole movie film on a flat disk—twelve or maybe fifteen inches wide—whirlin' around in front of a synchronized projector light, an' showin' up as clear as y'see 'em at the Strand!"

Bong!

As though yanked by the nape of the neck, Joe Feder halted in his tracks, which were leading him from the tiny reception room to his slightly larger inner sanctum. He paused to listen for another peal. None came.

That is, not until he had proceeded cautiously to the threshold of his private office, and then it was a peal from another bell. Or was it the same bell? Joe Feder had forgotten the location of the first one. Suddenly he recalled that the sound of ringing bells in the ears—loud bells—was the sign that you are going nuts. He said aloud:

"I must be goin' nuts!" And then, realizing the seriousness of the analysis, he said, "I didn't *hear* no bells!"

Bong!

He stood inside his office as though frozen, waiting in breathless silence for another clang. When his fright had abated he started once more for his desk, but his ears were rattled by a fourth peal. That settled it. He turned and dashed for the door, only to be pursued by the clanging bell—

Bong-bong-bong-bong!

Four times came the clarion call that curdled the very blood in his sparse

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frame. In a cold sweat he fumbled for the knob of the door, but, before he could find it, the door began to open by itself. That was when he almost fainted. The room was whirling and threatened to disappear before his eyes when the smiling, blond face of Egon Hauser appeared in the whirlpool. Then Feder heard the inventor's throaty chuckle.

"Bretty goot, hey?" Hauser exclaimed, and waved a fat hand in a generous circle. "How you liking dot, hey?"

Joe Feder's normal pallor returned as the green faded from his complexion. He grabbed Hauser's meaty shoulder with a thin, trembling hand for support.

"Hau-Hauser!" he whispered. "Did you . . . did you hear bells? Please say *you* heard the bells, too!"

"Me hear the bells?" the inventor echoed.

"If you didn't, Hauser," Feder gasped, "I'm goin' nuts!" He gestured hopelessly. "Everywhere around . . . bells! I've heard 'em for the past . . . ever since I got here. What does that mean, Hauser?"

"Ha-ha!" Hauser guffawed. "Thot means a soccess . . . a soccess, because no boiglar could make a moofe in this office widoud making a bik alarm. Thot's what it means, d' bells!"

The cigar dropped from Joe Feder's relaxed jaws.

"Look," Hauser said in triumph. He walked forward.

Bong!

"Brotection," the inventor said proudly. He walked again, producing a second clang. "It's all ofer the office, ant like you, Mr. Feder, the boiglar would go nots before gedding out from here. It's everywhere shining, so he couldn't escape widoud ringing bells—"

"You set up a burglar alarm here?" Feder gasped. "When?"

"Last night ant this morning," Hauser replied, and his blue eyes disappeared in fleshy folds as he grinned devilishly. "It's a brant-new inwention, wid a photoelectric cell—"

"Photoelectric cells ain't new!" Joe Feder muttered angrily. "Where's the circular film—the movie disk? We got an appointment."

"Wid me the photoelectric cell ain't new either," Hauser said, ignoring the request for the film disk. "Bot it's new, mine application of bending a ray from a photoelectric cell. Listen, Joe Feder. Arount this room goes one beam from light, zigging wid zagging all ofer, from here to there. You couldn't walk ten feet in any direction widoud breaking the beam ant ringing the boiglar alarm. Ant all from *one* photoelectric cell. Did you efer see like thot?"

Feder ran his gimlet-eyed gaze around the office. It looked no different from yesterday or the day before. He saw no bell. Everything was in order. He saw no beam of light. He moved his hand in the air, expecting to hear the clang. He peered under a chair, a bookcase, and studied the desk where Sophie, typist, secretary, réceptionist and Jane-of-all-trades, sat.

"Where does the beam start?" Feder demanded.

Hauser shrugged. "Find it," he said cryptically. "Right here in your office, Joe Feder, you got something as bedder as a moofie disk; if not bedder. Iss it goot, or ain't it?"

Feder raced through the reception space, breaking one beam after another, and then into his own office, breaking more beams. The bell tolled again and again, and then lapsed into silence. Feder emerged from the "Conference Room," his brows arched.

"I thought you said the whole place was protected."

"I toined off the svits," Hauser said with a grin.

"Turn it on again," Feder ordered.

"Hiding your eyes."

Feder covered his eyes and the inventor reached behind the bookcase. The president of Ace Promotions, Inc., came over on the run.

"O. K., Hauser," he said. "Let's hear the dope."

"You cheated!" Hauser accused, hurt.

"You said it operated on one photoelectric cell, one beam. What's the dope? You got something, Egon! This is the greatest thing in burglar alarms since Junior left the roller skate in the parlor. How does it work?"

Hauser grinned. "I do it wid mirrors."

"No, you don't! You can't reflect the power of an electric beam with glass. That is, the glass won't conduct the beam—"

"Bud wid a magnetized *metal* mirror, treated wid selenium!" Hauser broke in with an upraised, pudgy finger. "Arount this blace, Feder, iss more than a dozen special blates. The single photoelectric cell iss behind the door, ant it goes zigging wide zagging, all arount your office ant oud, ant indo the conference room, where it gonnects wid the bell. Ant all for the cost of *one* selenium tube!"

"For the love of St. Vitus!" Feder gasped. "Why didn't you tell me something about this, Hauser?"

"Because I didn't wand you selling stock in a magnetized selenium blate!" the inventor scolded. Then he suffered a painful remembrance. "Look, Feder, I didn't eat no dinner in two days. Where iss your check-signin' brother, Jacob?"

THE arrival of Jacob Feder, attorney at law and for the corporation, whose carefully guarded bank account made Ace Promotions a living thing, set the wheels of high-pressure progress in motion. He had cleared up his calendar of law cases with the expectation of drawing up a contract for the sale of motion-picture film on disks. Upon entering the office, he was greeted, instead, with ear-splitting peals of clanging bells and human laughter. Even Sophie, the girl at the reception desk, was hilariously enjoying the demonstration of Egon Hauser's latest wizardry.

"Ace Alarms!" Joe Feder shouted. "That's the name. And here's the slogan: 'Get an Ace Alarm an' hear every burglar confess his crime!' "

The film disk was forgotten. The hungry inventor put aside thoughts of food as Joe Feder wheeled the organization into action.

"The bank!" he exclaimed, pointing a finger at Brother Jake.

"What bank?" Jake puzzled. "And what about it?"

"Your . . . *our* bank!" Joe went on excitedly. "The City National . . . you know the president. Arrange an interview. We'll set up a demonstration in the main branch. Make it burglarproof, get a batch of publicity. Every bank in the country, every fur house, everybody'll be fightin' for this system. One photoelectric cell takes the place of ten private night watchmen!"

"We've spent money on the disks," Jake parried financially. "We'll first sign the contract, an' use the advance payment—"

"Forget the disk!" Joe interrupted. "Get out that check book an' get Hauser food money before he dies on our han's. He don't need much for the plates, do you, Egon?"

Hauser shrugged his fleshy shoulders. "Mostly for selenium. I magnetize mine own blates. No, I need more for foot than for materials, except we bedder have extra photoelectric cells for a bank demonstration, chust in case."

Jake Feder produced his check book with a sigh. Somehow he felt that this was just one more siphon into his supply of cash, earned so hard at the city bar. But some day Joe would hit it big—

THE Feder brothers and Egon Hauser descended upon the City National Bank in a three-parted body and, thanks to Jake's legal acquaintance with Mr. Y. Donald Kyle, the ultraconservative head of the main branch, gained the carpeted inner office. Immediately Mr. Y. Donald was obliged to exude a heavy chill to combat the severe heat of Joe Feder's salesmanship, for the president of Ace Promotions wasted no time on the springboard.

But it was a battle, what with Egon Hauser breaking in spasmodically with an accent thicker than cheese, and Brother Jake warning against rash promises. It was Joe Feder's private opinion that a man like Y. Donald Kyle should have a refrigerator coil wrapped around his heart to thaw it out. But the energetic promoter thrived on stern opposition and hacked away at the resistance with a fervor that astonished even himself.

"But we pay for protection that is quite adequate," Mr. Y. Donald said with a sigh, and that was a mistake, because he had said the same thing before. To Joe Feder, the man was running out of resistance.

"Only adequate!" Joe said with great dramatic effect. "An' of course, you *pay,* because manpower doesn't come for nothin'. More 'n' that, he must be fed, Mr. Y. Donald Kyle, an' the cost of livin' never stays still. Mostly it raises, an' what happens? *Your* costs go up —not because you get better service, or more service, but because the watchman guardin' your dough in this bank has t'live an' eat an' stay healthy—

"Now, with Ace Alarms," and Joe Feder beamed as he pinched two fingers together in a gesture of finesse, "the cost is not on'y low, but it stays there. It never goes on strike—"

"Yah," Egon agreed, "it goess on strike only d'bell!"

"Thanks, Hauser," Feder muttered and clenched his itching fist. "That's the on'y human part of the system—the bell goes on strike every time an undesirable enters your bank. Otherwise Ace Alarms is not human, so it hasn't the failin's of a human watchman. It can't go 'round the corner an' get a snort o' rye on cold nights. In other words, Mr. Kyle, you get what you pay for, an' we guarantee your last dollar against theft when you put in an Ace Alarm!"

"Of course—" Brother Jake began to mutter protestingly.

"To the last dollar!" Joe repeated, but with greater volume. "Because the system is unfallible!"

Mr. Y. Donald Kyle weakened and nodded. "In that case, I am willing to install the system," he said quickly. "You agree to install at this branch at no cost to us in exchange for the prestige it will bring you. Is that correct?"

"Exactly!" Joe Feder exclaimed, and thrust out a sweat-soaked hand to bind the bargain. "Course, word of the new

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alarm system will leak out, but we won't hang up any signs."

"Very well, Mr. Hauser, you may proceed at once!"

"Goot!" Egon sighed. "Widin t'ree days you can fire all your sbecial coppers, because not eefen you, Mr. Y., could get into your own benk widoud ringing all the bells!"

"Your confidence and guarantee of the system," Mr. Kyle said, showing them to the door, "makes it a very attractive proposition. I am sure you have reason to believe in it."

Outside in the street, Brother Jake wanted to be taken to the nearest hospital, he felt that sick. It was a wealthy bank.

"Forget it!" Joe scoffed. "Within a coupla weeks we'll have crews workin' night 'n' day installin' Ace Alarms. If City National uses it, every bank an' jewelry store'll want it. We've hit it, Jake, jus' like I tol' you we'd hit it. Come on, Hauser!"

"Should we eat?" Hauser inquired.

"Who wants t'eat?" Joe roared, and slapped the inventor's well-larded back. "Get them sensitized plates fixed up. Get back to that bank with a set of alarms. Don't waste time on food!"

FOR the next two days Joe Feder sandwiched trips to the bank between outbursts of promotional plans. He discovered dozens of selling points. The method of installation was, in itself, a selling point, because it was done in broad daylight with the help of a few electricians. Egon Hauser went around supervising the angles of the reflecting plates.

"Angle from instidence equals angle from reflection!" he warned, and made minute adjustments. "From here to there, it goess, zigging wid zagging—ah-ah, be careful you shouldn't demage the selenium on the blate, blease. No scretchings, blease."

"What a marvel!" Joe Feder breathed and returned to the office in high spirits that took a terrific drop when Sophie, the receptionist, introduced the most sinister-looking personage that had ever invaded the precincts of Ace Promotions, Inc. He was ten times more forbidding and foreboding than a process server, being a large man with a set of eyebrows that looked for all the world like trailing arbutus, rising from either side and joining in the center close to the bridge of his bulbous nose. Of course, there were no flowers in the growth, as there would be in trailing arbutus, especially in the spring.

"Mr. Tony Fortunato," Sophie introduced. "He's come to see you about Ace Alarms."

"Oh-h-h-h," Joe Feder breathed. "Come . . . come into my office, Mr. Fortunate—"

"For-too-notto!" the man growled in correction. "Tony Fortunato, an' I happen t'be the pres' of the Poifect Pertection Comp'ny."

"Perfect Protection—" Joe Feder repeated. He closed the door. "You . . . you've heard about Ace Alarms?"

"Natchelly," Fortunato growled. "We're in th' bus'ness of pertectin' people's proppaty. We'll give y' five gran' fer th' process."

Joe Feder's stomach did a complete twist of delight, and he began to reckon. Five grand was plenty, but only a dope would offer what an alarm system was worth. A smart guy would offer a tenth of its value, and a heel like Tony Fortunato, especially with comic-strip eyebrows, would offer a hundredth of its value, which made Egon Hauser's process worth a cool half million.

"I'm sorry, but your name today is *un*Fortunato." Joe Feder laughed in full enjoyment of the unique twist. "It's no soap—"

"It ain't hay, either," Fortunato growled, and scowled, making his deep-set eyes disappear completely behind the lowered shrubbery. "I'm perpared t' give y' five gran' outright, an' ten p'cent off the top price of ev'ry alarm we install."

"An' if y' don't install any alarms," Feder returned, "we're outta luck. The answer is still no, Fortunato, because we're in the business of protectin' people an' businesses with a faultless mechanical apparatus. Now, if you'd like to *sell* our Ace Alarms to your clients on a commission basis, I'll make an attractive—"

"Listen, tapewoim!" Fortunato growled, rising in a manner that made Joe Feder long for a witness to what might follow, "I come over here t' do y' a favor; Fortunato don't ast 'em, an' wouldn' take 'em. An' I'll be back in a coupla days afta this foist flush o' success abandons y' brain!"

The president of Perfect Protection Co. slammed all doors as he left the place in high dudgeon and Joe Feder in higher spirits. He could scarcely wait for Brother Jake to finish with an accident case in city court so he could tell him the news, for Jake had suffered acute inroads of the check book when Egon Hauser began buying photoelectric cells and discarding them, or breaking them during experiments. Jake needed his financial morale lifted.

The news of Fortunato's visit was like a deep breath of smelling salts to a woozy fighter, and Jake was more woozy than fighter when it came to taking wallops in the pocketbook.

"Imagine that, Jake," Joe gasped. "A half million!"

Jake wagged his head dubiously. "A

half million I think you should've taken. Was it in cash?"

"Well-l-l-l," Joe murmured, "it wasn't in anything, actually. Fact, I don't think Perfect Protection has anywhere near the kinda dough this is worth—"

The telephone rang and brought glad tidings from Egon Hauser that the first Ace Alarm was ready for duty at the City National Bank. Joe and Jake Feder grabbed their hats and coats and hastened over on the double-quick. It was after closing time and Egon Hauser stood at the doorway proudly surveying the scene.

"Boifect!" the inventor confided. "Who could tell that a man going t'rough this blace would ring two dossen bells?"

It was indeed a triumph, because Hauser had so concealed the beam-reflection plates that detection was virtually impossible. He had made them a part of the fixtures and altered the tone of the fixture to match the color of the plate. At one point the beam struck a picture frame and caromed off at an angle to a plate affixed to the FDIC plate on a teller's cage. He had utilized every conceivable spot with an ingenuity that was startling.

"All it has to do," said Mr. Y. Donald Kyle, "is work!"

"Ha-ha!" Egon chuckled. "If nothing else, it doess thot."

And he proved it to everybody's satisfaction. The Feder brothers, workmen and even Mr. Y. Donald Kyle himself walked everywhere in an effort to escape the maze of reflected electric beams. The bank sounded like a rehearsal of Swiss bell ringers. And Egon Hauser chuckled with all the joy of a triumphant child. At the end of fifteen minutes of experimentation, Mr. Y. Donald Kyle congratulated the members of Ace Promotions and pronounced it a splendid innovation.

"I will call off the watchmen," he confided, "and I might as well tell you that Carter's, the jewelers, are interested. I told them that I'd send you down, if our trial proved satisfactory!"

"Like I said!" Joe Feder exclaimed as they left the bank. "It's a bung starter. Hauser, you can kill y'self with food now. Jake, give him some money for three dinners!"

Jake reached and dug deep. He sighed. "I think maybe you should've taken the half million," he murmured, and stuffed some money into Egon Hauser's waiting hands.

"Delephone Mr. Y. Kyle," Hauser said as he left them. "Ant dell him be sure to t'row in the svits. It don't woik widoud currency!"

"O. K., Hauser," Joe laughed. "An' get a good night's sleep, because we're goin' to town with this t-morra!"

THE morrow held great things for Ace Promotions, Inc., because Carter's was a jewelry outfit that paid the highest prices for protection. In view of this fact, Joe Feder reckoned, they would be willing to pay plenty. This thing had no fixed value. That was the economic beauty of the system. You could collect all that the client would stand. Jake did that with his law clients, and, from what Joe had heard, Jake's clients stood for plenty.

First to arrive at the office, Joe thought the place was being robbed, for the sound of violent bell ringing assailed his ears. His hands trembled as he opened the door and he sighed with relief, because it was only the telephone bell. Now, who would be calling at a quarter after eight—

"Hello!" Joe called impatiently, and

then whitened. "Hello. . . . Jake? . . . Well, it don't sound like you! . . . Hospital! . . . What hospital? . . . For the luvva St. Vitus, what're y' doin' there? . . . No, I didn't get a paper. . . . *What?* . . . Speak up, Jake, your voice is weak! . . . Fifty thousand! . . . I don't believe it—"

Jake had evidently fainted, because his voice had trailed off into a throaty gurgle. Joe Feder slammed the telephone set to Sophie's desk and raced out. He grabbed a taxicab and ordered a race with traffic lights to Mercy Hospital. Another race to the third floor left Joe a fit case for hospitalization himself, but he regained his power when he sighted the screaming headline in the newspaper on Jake's bed:

CITY NATIONAL ROBBED
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"It . . . it *can't* be!" Joe Feder gasped and blinked rapidly to help focus the smaller type that was swirling before his eyes.

"So it can't, an' there it is!" Jake murmured. His white face was barely discernible against the snow-colored pillow. "An' all you did was promise to make good!"

"It's a gag!" Joe exclaimed. "It must be. Hauser said it was foolproof."

"Whoever is smart enough to get fifty grand is no fool," Jake wailed. "It could stop fools, but not a smart burglar."

Joe was already on the telephone, calling the City National. He had considerable difficulty getting Mr. Y. Donald Kyle and, when finally summoned, Mr. Kyle was in a mood exactly suited to a manager whose bank has just been relieved of fifty grand. Joe Feder's ears crackled under the tirade of abuse, which ended with something that sounded like:

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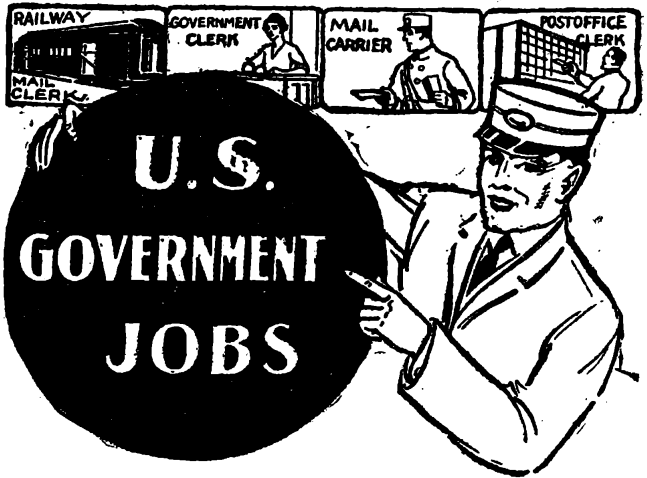

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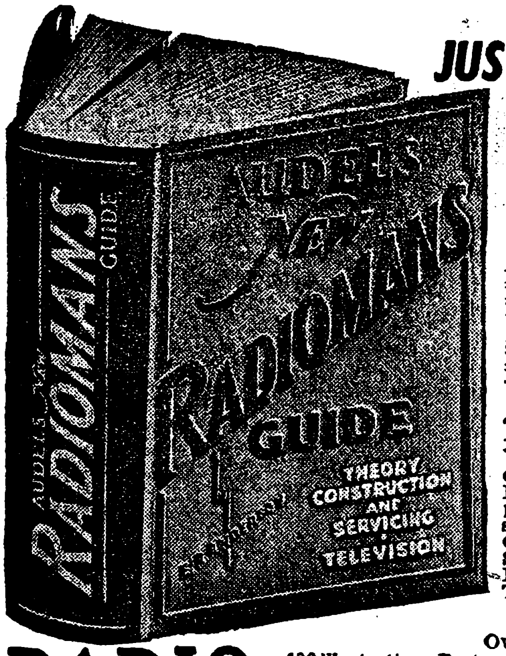
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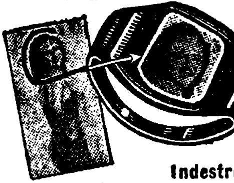

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"You had better start wheeling the money over here!"

Joe replaced the receiver and looked at Brother Jake. Another seizure had terminated his agony, which was terrific and understandable for the very reason that Jake Feder had nowhere near fifty thousand dollars, and giving up what he had would approximate a complete removal of his heart. In fact, Jake would have given up his heart with less struggle.

And so Joe Feder left, wondering where he could find Egon Hauser, the cause of it all. Egon, in all probability, was in some hospital with dyspepsia from last night's food orgy.

"Why, the double-crossin', no-good—" Joe couldn't think of terms low enough to fit Hauser's low-downness. "Why the devil didn't he bring that circular film around? That was the deal we should've been paid for by now. But no! He knows I'm a push-over for a thing like a sensational burglar alarm and—"

Burglar alarm! Why, the electric beam probably shone like radium or something, and led the burglar to the money. What a dumb cluck, but what a dumber cluck he was to fall for the gag!

Sophie was already at the office, weeping and getting her face streaked with mascara.

"Get Hauser on the phone!" Joe ordered.

Sophie made a few passes at the switchboard and handed Joe the telephone. "Here he is. You can use my phone."

Joe Feder proceeded to bawl the living daylights out of the inventor, who, strange to say, wasn't at all perturbed about the robbery. He had only one consolation.

"In science," he said, squeezing the words in sideways among Feder's tirade, "we loin by trials wid errors."

"Yeah!" Feder screamed. "You make the errors, an' we go on trial. Well, keep outta my sight for a few days!"

AS he replaced the receiver, the door of his office opened, and a familiar voice said: "Py golly, it sounded like Mr. Feder vas in the next room."

"Hauser!" Joe roared. He turned on Sophie. "This is no time for gags!"

"Oh, please, Mr. Feder!" she pleaded. "I . . . I don't know what I'm doing."

"You know, Joe," Hauser laughed, "the joke iss on me. I t'ink I'm knowing what was wronk."

"Lay off me!" Feder growled. "If you was worth more'n ten cents, I'd send you over to the City National on account—"

Feder turned at the sound of the door opening and he recoiled at the sight of Tony Fortunato's gigantic frame. The trailing-arbutus brows were lifted now, and there was a suggestion of a leer about the corners of his generous mouth.

"Well, I'm here," he bellowed and thumbed Joe Feder into the private office. He herded Hauser in and closed the door behind them.

"I . . . I see you can read," Feder muttered with a great show of courage. "I'd never have believed it."

"I can stand all the cracks you can t'ink up," Fortunato laughed. "Anything you say this mornin' is really funny."

"Well, I don't feel very funny," Feder replied. "If you came here to laugh, make your chuckle an' beat it. Ace Alarms is in a jam an' time is valuable. So long."

"Don't act too fast," Fortunato growled, and thumbed toward Hauser. "Can I talk in front of him?"

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Feder nodded and Hauser seemed very flattered.

"Natchelly, this publicity don't do your alarm system no good," Fortunato said, slapping a paper in his coat pocket. "So I ain't offerin' no five gran'. But I'm prepared t' give you twenny-five hunnerd fer exclusive rights t' the process. We manufacture, an' we install, when, as an' if."

Feder managed a sickly smile. "Chicken feed!" he murmured with dwindling spirits. "You're forty-seven thousan' five hundred bucks shy of what we gotta have."

The trailing-arbutus eyebrows headed for the stratosphere.

"You guaranteed to make good on losses?" Fortunato bellowed.

Feder nodded, and died a thousand deaths while the president of Perfect Protection finished his guffaws.

"In that case," Fortunato chuckled, "th' price goes down t' fifteen hunnerd cash, an' we replace the stolen money—"

"Reblace it!" Hauser screamed. "How can—"

"We'll make good," Fortunato added hastily. "We'll refund the bank fifty gran', an' give you fifteen hunnerd for the process."

Joe Feder had to nod, because his throat was too tight for the passage of words. Hauser readily agreed. It was a lot of money for an idea that had come to him during a nightmare. They shook hands and Feder dictated the agreement to Sophie. It was typed quickly and signed with two shaky signatures.

"Swell," Fortunato sighed. "Now, goilie, git me the City National—just the switchboard." Sophie complied and Fortunato called: "Hello, City National? . . . Well, this is Honest John Smit'. . . . Will y' tell one of the boys t' look in the lower right-han' drawer of Mr. Kyle's desk, an' he'll find the fifty gran' that was taken from the bank las' night. S'long, honey!"

Joe Feder's face had taken on a sickly green pallor and he fought against toppling to the floor in complete collapse. What could you do in a case like this? That's exactly what Feder did—nothing. He consoled himself with the vague assurance that there would come a day of retribution.

Not so with Egon Hauser. He studied Tony Fortunato's face as the president of Perfect Protection lighted a dollar cigar.

"Waid!" Hauser said, as Fortunato started out.

"You'll get the dough by certified check," Fortunato flung back.

"Check, who cares?" Hauser said with a shrug. "Did you boiglars find the svits ant toin it off?"

"No, sir, the 'svits,' as you call it, was sealed."

"Vell, how—"

"We put a man in there to woik as a porter while you was installin' the business." Fortunato laughed. "He came out with a diagram of the beam directions."

"But nobody could walk t'rough dose beams—"

"But somebody could crawl on the floor, bimbo!" Fortunato guffawed and chucked Hauser under his fat chins. "An' that's jus' what our man did. He crawled *under* the beams. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go down an' renew a Poifect Pertection contract wid Carter's, th' joolry store!"

THE END.

OKAYED

Continued from page 88

BUT Harry had a more practical use for the odds and ends. He would collect a lot of items, especially the identification cards, lodge cards, traveler cards, personal and business cards. Then he would acquire checks. When he had a goodly number of these he would set out on his mission. He'd generally operate on a Saturday afternoon back when Saturday was a working day.

He'd go to a thriving city, let's say Detroit. There he would register under the name of Brown in one hotel, Gates at another, and Jones at another, and so on. He'd be a guest in half a dozen places—a salesman in the city over the week end. Then he would start his train of operations!

He would have six or seven checks which represented pay checks and the like. He would go out on a shopping tour. He'd buy furnishings here and there at stores and shops, and when the time came to pay, he would be a little short. The clerk or credit manager would verify that he was at the hotel, the check would look like a company check of a big corporation, and so it would be cashed, and Harry would be given the change. He'd spend ten or

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fifteen dollars, and get his change from a seventy-five or fifty-dollar check. This operation would be repeated perhaps eight or ten times if he had enough material to pose as that many different men.

One day he tried it in what was generally one of his easiest touches, a large department store in a big city.

The check, that day, made out to the credit of Philip Hartwick, let's say, went up through the shoot to the credit office with the O. K. of the division manager that he was satisfied with the identification, and that the check was genuine.

Presently, word came from the credit manager's office to the division manager that the latter was to bring his customer upstairs. This was nothing new to Harry, he'd been through it before. Besides, Hartwick, whom he was impersonating, was a salesman from Colorado, and this was in the East. Remember, confidence was Harry's greatest asset. Boldly, he walked into the credit manager's office. The man had the check in his hand.

"Are you Philip Hartwick?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, I am," said Harry, with frank and honest eyes peering directly at the credit manager.

"Might I see your identification?" the man asked.

Harry was happy to oblige. He furnished the full complement of cards and letters which established him unequivocally as Philip Hartwick. He went into his complete routine. The man heard him through. Then he removed his glasses. He stood up, and Harry was conscious of somebody behind him. But he faced it through. If there was any doubt he would gladly return the merchandise.

"I think that would be better," said the man, "and I'll keep the cards. You see, Philip Hartwick is my son!"

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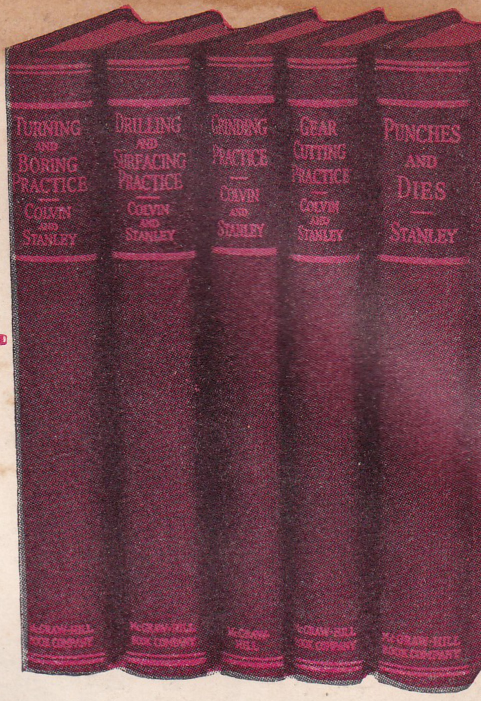
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